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The Arctic Coal Rush

Spitsbergen and the British Imagination 1910-1920

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This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text. The Dissertation is no more than 20,000 words in length excluding the acknowledgements, declaration, list of references, tables, captions and appendices.

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Photo. Lafayette.

Yours very truly,
W. S. Bruce

Chapter 1

Introduction

“Theories create worlds rather than corresponding to them” (Smith 1992, 134).

The British love affair with the Arctic has been both fractious and intense. There have been moments of great national fascination with the High North, particularly when it has claimed the lives of prominent British explorers. But there have also been periods of prolonged disinterest. The later part of the 19th century was one such phase. In the aftermath of the much publicised search for John Franklin, lost somewhere in the North-West passage since 1845, the British appetite for Arctic exploration evaporated. Northern expeditions were deemed too costly, both financially and in terms of human life. With a rapidly expanding empire, the British public had new lands to fascinate them. And many of these recent acquisitions seemed to offer more commercial opportunity than the frozen tundra of the High North (Ravenstein 1891). Such was the ambivalence towards the Arctic in this period, that Britain gave its support to an abortive Swedish-Norwegian territorial claim to the then uninhabited Spitsbergen (now Svalbard) archipelago in 1873 which had hitherto been considered a “Terra Nullius” (or no-man’s land). The archipelago had once been a base for the British whaling industry and was even claimed for James I in 1607. But over 250 years later, Spitsbergen, along with much of the Arctic, had come “to be regarded as practically uninhabitable and as offering no promise of economic gain” by the British public and its government (Mathiesen 1954, 28).

At the Paris Peace conference in 1919, the future ownership of Spitsbergen arose again. This time the reaction in Britain was totally different. No longer seen as a barren wasteland devoid of commercial opportunity, the archipelago had come to excite both speculators in the City of London and some politicians in Britain’s government. Rumours of coal in great abundance, mountains of iron ore, and deposits of gold and oil transformed the British public perception of Spitsbergen into a potential Arctic ‘El Dorado’. An investment boom ensued. British mining companies grew rapidly and eventually claimed mineral rights over close to half of the archipelago – by far the largest land claim of any other nation. Spitsbergen was suddenly deemed so valuable that calls for full annexation by Britain were made in the Houses of Parliament in 1919. The High North suddenly seemed to recapture some of its allure. This dissertation traces how that happened.

The story has great relevance today. The Arctic is once more exciting attention from scientists, venture capitalists and policy makers from across the world. Like the pack-ice itself, it appears that the future of the Arctic is in a sudden and radical new state of flux. There is renewed

optimism about the region's development prospects and its natural resources following an "environmental state change". Accompanying each new resource discovery are growing fears about the potential for environmental degradation and future conflict between - and within - Arctic states (Keskitalo, 2004, Howard 2009; Emmerson 2010; Berkman 2010). Caught up in the pace of this change and on the challenges of the future, we tend to forget that the region has a long commercial history. Tensions over seemingly abundant resources, and concerns about the lack of a legal framework to administer them are far from new in the High North. And while the shortage of sea ice in 2007 may have been unprecedented, the recent explosion of economic investment in Arctic mining, oil and gas, tourism and shipping is certainly not (Dalby 2003; Heinenen 2005; Hacquebord and Avango 2009; Heinenen and Southcott 2010; Avango et al 2011).

For over 500 years the Arctic has been a classic 'resource frontier' (Hacquebord and Avango 2009; Hacquebord 2009). It has long been exploited for its natural riches – for the fur trade, gold and other mineral mining, for whaling and fishing, and latterly for oil and gas – in order to supply markets at lower latitudes. Periodic cycles of new investment and subsequent overexploitation have often led to disinvestment and decline. With the development of each new economy, the Arctic's imaginative allure for Western investors seems to suddenly reawaken, apparently undimmed. The reason, it seems, is that investment booms depend to a great extent on geography. Because of its distance and difference from the established centres of global commerce, the Arctic has often been misunderstood by eager investors hoping to exploit a new economic frontier. Accurate information is often hard to come by and Arctic boom therefore often turns to Arctic bust - usually because of some combination of the harsh environment and changes in macroeconomic conditions. In the latest bout of investor interest in the North, the cycle may repeat itself if we do not pay enough attention to the lessons from history. "In order to understand the current quest for natural resources in the Arctic and its political consequences, research is called for into the history of similar development in the High Arctic in the past" (Avango et al. 2011, 29). The region's long and troubled economic history is a foil for the exuberant claims of a new era of future Arctic wealth. Looking back, we can think critically about the ways Western audiences have come to understand economic development in the Arctic and what that might mean for the future.

The story of the changing public attitudes towards Spitsbergen and its resources may also help fill in some gaps in Arctic history. For too long, the historical scholarship of the High North has been focused mainly on Western explorers and their heroic tales of derring do (David 2000; for examples see Officer and Page 2001, Hayes, D. 2003, McGhee 2004, Vaughan 2008.). These histories have traditionally been limited in their geographical scope – to the quest for the Pole

and the conquest of the Canadian North. They can also divide the Arctic's history into discrete phases. Their analyses often jumps from the so-called 'heroic era' of polar exploration which closed with the First World War to the heavy militarisation of the Cold War without much consideration of what occurred in between. Such narratives leave many questions unanswered. Most obviously, what drove these Western audiences to send explorers north? What were the driving forces behind the periodic bouts of public interest in the Arctic? How did the actions of these explorers impact broader geopolitical and economic trends in the region?

Some answers to these questions have emerged. Riffenburgh (1994) and Spufford (1996) have shown in different ways how the exploits of polar explorers came to excite their audiences back home, either through newspapers or books. More recently, David (2000) has extended this work by highlighting the role of key institutions and a wider range of media in shaping the British public's view of the North. Grace (2002) has explained how the Arctic became a space for the articulation of national identity in North America and Fogelson (1992) has focused on the close relationship between the act of exploring and international politics. Although they vary in focus, all these works aim to get beyond the simple narratives of exploration to something more fundamental: how Western audiences have come to understand the Arctic region.

A key part of the answer to this question does still lie with the explorer. As a number of scholars have pointed out, the printed accounts, stereotypes and images that returned with heroic expeditions to the Polar Regions were often subsequently retold and reaffirmed in books, magazines, Geographical Societies, travelling panoramas and lecture halls across Britain and the Western world (Spufford 1996; Jones 2003). Together these 'texts' coalesced to produce a particular 'imaginative geography' of the Arctic which was both flexible and durable – "the result of spatially wide-ranging regimes of power and the ability of some to legitimise one imagining of a place over others" (Shields 1992; Davis 2005, 609). A national emissary in this unfamiliar place, the explorer has for many centuries been the arbiter of this imaginative process. "As a consequence the role of the explorer became paramount and the Arctic was increasingly represented in relation to his world" (David 2004, 86).

But this focus on the explorer can make us miss important parts of the ways in which the Arctic is really understood. In particular, the practices of exploration have often been linked with notions of testing the self and the collection of objective scientific knowledge (Larson 2011, Bravo and Sorlin 2002). Polar science is often portrayed as the most noble and disinterested of its kind. As a result exploration has often been divorced from the commercial world of investment that often subsidised and drove it (with the exception perhaps of recent work on whaling)(Bravo 2006). Commercial interests often enrolled polar explorers as they sought to

shape western attitudes the North. In 1919, as now, private companies (particularly in the raw material sector) were instrumental in promoting the idea of an Arctic rich in resources but also vulnerable to annexation and to militarisation.

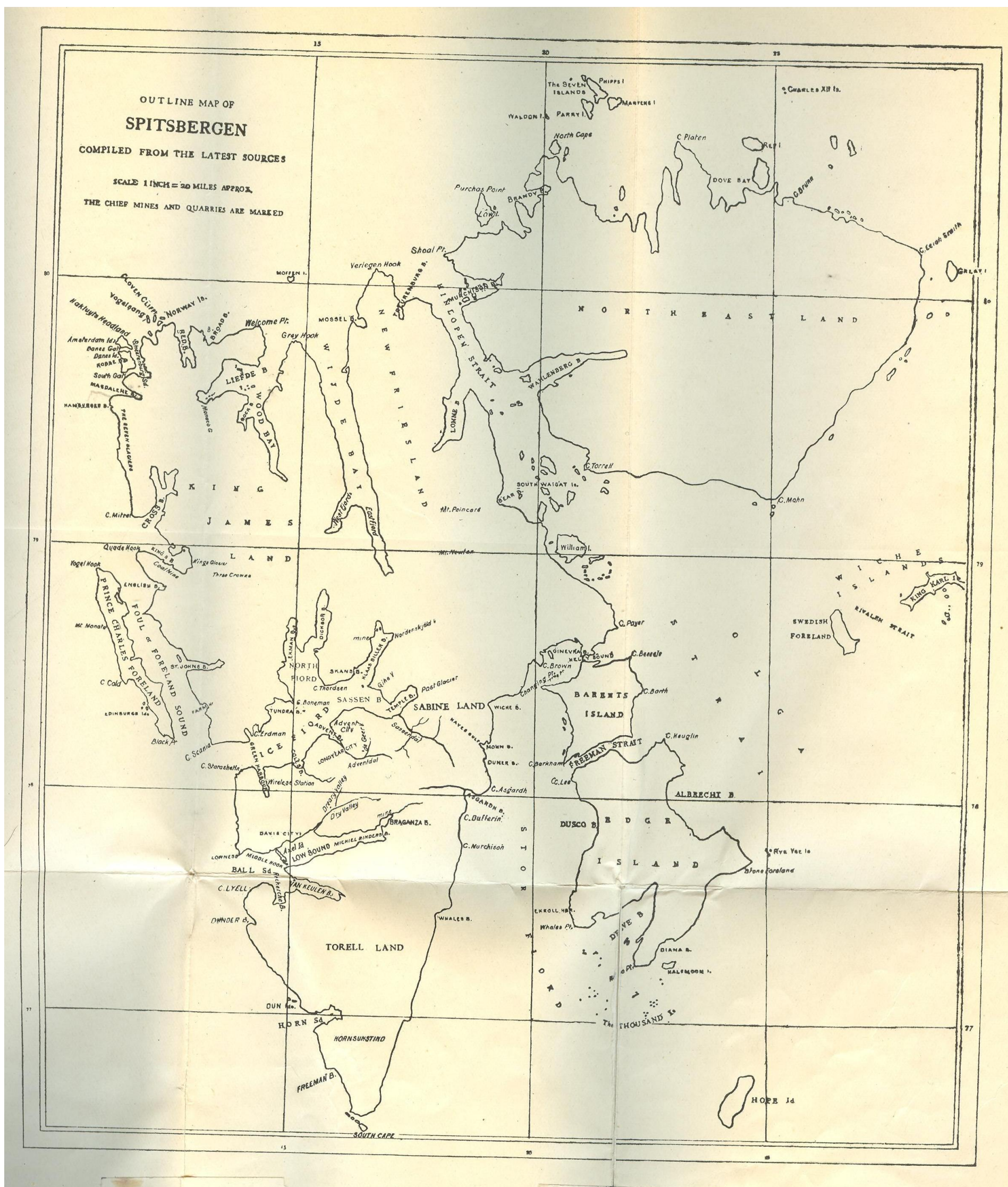
This dissertation aims to refocus the debate on these commercial interests to try and understand the role they play in imaginatively mapping the Arctic. It examines two British mining companies - The Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate and the Northern Exploration Company - that influenced and coordinated much the popular discourse about Spitsbergen in Britain before, during and, immediately after the First World War. It draws on the Large-scale Historical exploitation of Polar Areas (LASHIPA) project which since 2001 has published seven reports on the excavation of important archaeological sites on Spitsbergen, many from this period (LASHIPA 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009a 2009b). Although these reports describe some of the history of these settlements and the companies that built them, they do not explain how commercial business interests sought to influence public opinion. Reference is also made to many histories of the Treaty of Spitsbergen (1920) and the unique legal status of the Svalbard archipelago in international law (For example: Arlov 1994; Arlov 2005; Dole 1922; Conway 1906; Rudmose Brown 1920; Mathiesen 1954; Ostreng 1977; Chatuverdi 1996; Johannessen 1997; Ulfstein 1993) as well as recent work on the critical geopolitics of the Polar regions (Dodds 1997; Dodds 2002; Dodds and Hemmings 2009; Dodds 2010a; Dodds 2010b Leane 2004).

Sources

The vast majority of this research has been archival. In an effort to maintain historical consistency, the original place names are used throughout. The main sources have been the papers and letters of the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate Ltd. and the Northern Exploration Company Ltd. These documents are held variously in the National Archives (NA), Scott Polar Research Institute archive (SPRI), Royal Geographical Society archive (RGS), the National Library of Scotland (NLS), as well the Royal Scottish Museum archives (RSM). Extensive use is made of published sources, such as contemporary newspaper reports, company reports and other shareholder information, as well as academic journals. The aim is not simply to outline and describe the various “texts” that were circulating in this period. It is to identify exactly how they were produced, by whom and to what end. For this the private correspondence between the key figures in the two companies and leading politicians and civil servants of the day is also relevant.

Overview

In what follows, I first outline the commercial development of Spitsbergen and its crucial political context and then focus on the development of the Spitsbergen boom from 1910 to 1920. My central argument is that much of the investor interest was the result of sustained and complex campaign by the two major British companies with Spitsbergen investments. They made two two linked arguments. The first was the economic mining potential of the archipelago. The second was their campaign for annexation during and immediately after the First World War. I explain how both these narratives were developed and how they came to influence public opinion. Finally, I draw some parallels and continuities with the modern day Arctic.



Chapter 2

An Economic History of Spitsbergen

“The Northern Ocean and whatever lands there might be within it belonged to this other world, which some people thought of as the home of the dead” (Conway 1906, 2).

The rush for Spitsbergen’s mineral resources in 1919 was the last in a succession of unregulated resource booms that developed while the islands were still officially a ‘no man’s land’, not part of any nation state. Just one year later, the Allied powers agreed on the terms of a totally unique international legal regime for the archipelago – The Spitsbergen Treaty of 1920 - which simultaneously granted sovereignty to Norway while guaranteeing open access to all signatory states. Among other things, the Treaty confirmed Spitsbergen as distinct from other areas of the Arctic. It was an acknowledgement both of the archipelago’s different environment (warmed by the Gulf Stream) and its lack of an indigenous population. It was also a reflection of the many centuries of ambiguity and international political wrangling over its legal status and over who could legitimately claim access to its resources.

These tensions stretched all the way back to Spitsbergen’s original discovery (Arlov 2005). The return of the Dutchman Willem Barents from a journey to the North Atlantic in 1592 immediately resulted in two competing claims to sovereignty over a mysterious new Arctic archipelago he claimed to have discovered. The first was by Denmark as part of its Greenland dominions. The other was by England. James I’s claim was even officially marked in 1607 when Henry Hudson erected a cross replete with the British royal coat of arms at Magdalenfjorden on Spitsbergen’s western edge (Mathiesen 1954). This early political disagreement continued after the pioneering explorers gave way to commercial whalers who established Spitsbergen’s first industry during the mid 17th century. British and Dutch ships went North in large numbers, often fighting each other for access to the best coves. In 1633 the island’s first semi-permanent settlement at Smeerenberg was built. Dutch whalers may have even over-wintered there (Arlov 1994). Sustained both by the high price of lighting oil in Europe and the abundance of marine life around Spitsbergen, whaling continued until the 1670s (Avango et al 2011). “In the course of the 17th century the principle had developed that whaling and sealing off the island was to be open to all nations, and as there was no permanent populations, the rights and duties generally associated with the exercise of sovereignty over a territory did not apply in all cases to Svalbard” (Mathiesen 1954, 17). A gradual acceptance therefore emerged among the interested powers of the principle of ‘Terra Nullius’ or no man’s land. It provided a legal solution to the growing tensions between the internationalisation of Spitsbergen’s economy and the desire to protect national interests (Ulfstein 1996).

In the 18th century Spitsbergen's economy shifted mainly towards trapping and the fur trade. Pomor hunters from Northern Russia extended their search for "soft gold" northwards, hunting Spitsbergen's large populations of bear, fox and reindeer. Some built makeshift cabins on the island and overwintered in harsh conditions. British and other European governments sent occasional expeditions, albeit primarily for scientific purposes (the best known being the 1773 Royal Navy Phipps expedition, with the young midshipman Horatio Nelson aboard). But by the close of the century, the overexploitation of Spitsbergen's stocks and the decline of the European fur trade led to economic collapse. The archipelago was largely abandoned to just a few sealing vessels visiting from Northern Norway.

It was not long, however, before commercial interest returned. As early as 1610, Poole had noted "sea coales which burnt very well" and which could be used on occasion to restock whaling vessels (Dole 1922, 21). But little thought had been given to the wider commercial possibilities of minerals in Spitsbergen's interior. This began to change however, with the growing number of Swedish scientific expeditions to the islands in the early to mid 19th Century. Funded mainly by industrialists, men such as Sven Loven in 1837 mapped large parts of the archipelago's previously unknown centre. In doing so, they built on earlier work by the Englishman, Sir Edward Sabine in 1823 and began to uncover promising mineral deposits, particularly coal. The return of the Norwegian Professor Adolf Erik Nordenskjold from a prospecting expedition to Spitsbergen in 1871 in particular greatly intensified public interest in the interior. Nordenskjold subsequently applied to the Swedish-Norwegian Government for a license to start coprolite mining (a source of phosphate) in Cape Thorsden. He also urged the establishment of a permanent settlement on Spitsbergen to further Arctic science. Wary of compromising the archipelago's Terra Nullius status, the government first sought the views of other interested powers before agreeing. Britain and her European neighbours were broadly indifferent and raised no objections to a Swedish-Norwegian occupation. With the exhaustion of whale stocks, they had lost interest in the commercial potential of the islands.

A late objection by the Russian government ultimately stopped Nordenskjold's plans for Spitsbergen. But his efforts nevertheless became a catalyst for debate throughout Europe about Spitsbergen's mineral promise. Initially there were plenty of sceptics in Britain. In 1874, a letter to *The Times* derided a Royal Geographical Society (RGS) meeting to discuss the commercial possibilities of Arctic exploration. The writer commented that "The discovery of coal formations somewhere in the neighbourhood of the North Pole, and the probable existence of valuable mineral beds not very far from them, are among the points strongly insisted upon, and they are such as we should expect to hear from the sages of Laputa rather than from the learned

members of an English Scientific Society.”¹ Another letter in 1885 urged explorers to focus their attention on “rich inland provinces [which] may possibly be remunerated in time to come. Arctic voyages have no such reimbursement in the most distant prospect”.² But for some there was a growing interest in Spitsbergen’s mineral deposits. In 1883 the prestigious Paris based Ecoles des Mines sent a team of four professional geologists to Northern Norway and to Spitsbergen to fully investigate the claims.³

At the same time Spitsbergen’s profile as a base for Arctic exploration was growing. The ballooning expeditions of Wellman and earlier Saloman Andree, were widely covered in the press. Best selling accounts of the exploration in the archipelago also appeared, such as Sir Martin Conway’s travelogue *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen* (1897). Conway’s expedition photographs even became a semi-permanent exhibition at the Alpine Club in London. And as public interest slowly grew, so did access to the archipelago. Commercial tourist cruises to the “Land of the Midnight Sun” were first begun by the German Orient Line in 1894 and then subsequently by P & O in 1906 (Figure 4).⁴ The Norwegian government built a permanent post office on the island in 1897 for the growing number of visitors arriving on the weekly service from Tromsø. From 1896-8 tourists could even stay in Spitsbergen’s first hotel on Advent Point. Many visitors bought the specially produced (though functionally useless) Spitsbergen stamps as mementos of their visit (Dole 1922).

It was not long before these tourists and explorers were joined by a new wave of mineral prospectors. In 1898 a German expedition prospected on Bear Island (Bjornaya) – situated 300 km south of the main archipelago. They staked out and fenced off surface coal deposits forming part of a substantial German land claim. In response, a Russian expedition also visited the same site soon after, pulling down the German fences and raising the Russian flag. In 1899 the Norwegian skipper, Soren Zachariassen went a stage further. He actually brought home a cargo of coal from Spitsbergen to sell in Northern Norway. This was the first attempt to actively sell Spitsbergen coal. It would certainly not be the last.

Soon a number of small Spitsbergen prospecting syndicates were emerging from across Europe. The first was the British Spitsbergen Coal and Iron Ore Syndicate based in Sheffield in 1904. This was followed in 1906 by the formation of the American Arctic Coal Company (ACC), funded largely by the Boston venture-capitalist Charles William Longyear (after whom Svalbard’s capital Longyearbyen is ultimately named). Despite the labour militancy of its Scandinavian

¹ The Times, 17th Nov 1874

² The Times, 11th Feb 1885

³ The Times, 3rd April 1883

⁴ The Times, 9th May 1872

miners and several contested land claims, the ACC was the first company to achieve year-round intensive commercial mining on Spitsbergen, producing perhaps as much as 146,690 tons during its eight year production span (Hoel 1938). Its operation proved that coal mining was viable on Spitsbergen with the right technology and investment, albeit with enduring concerns about its long-term profitability. The ACC activities also increased press interest in Spitsbergen in both America and Britain. *The Washington Evening Star* reported that “the possession of Spitsbergen is likely to be of immense economic importance as it contains vast deposits of valuable minerals”.⁵ Another newspaper even suggested that the sun in Spitsbergen might provide a cure for baldness.⁶ By 1910 Nordenskjöld wrote that:

“only a few years ago the idea of opening up coal mines in Spitsbergen seemed a fantastic dream, but there has been a rapid development and now all conditions are changed. In 1903 an English-Norwegian company set up an expedition with some 20 miners. To all appearances the experiment was successful. The next year an American company followed their example and it seems probable that there will be a general race, so to speak, for the coal fields” (cited in Dole 1922, 75).

By 1920, the ‘race’ was in full swing. In that year 24 mining companies from a variety of countries, including Britain, Denmark, Sweden, Russia and Norway, all held registered assets in Spitsbergen (LASHIPA 2004). But this new terrestrial economy on Spitsbergen exposed many of the limitations of the Terra Nullius regime. Unlike the marine whaling and sealing industry of previous centuries (or even fur trapping) the mining deposits were in a fixed location and required the building of a permanent infrastructure for prospecting and mining. There was however, no legal framework to administer the claims or protect company assets. Conflict therefore soon arose over access rights to different deposits and many incidents of theft were reported (Mathiesen 1954). To address these problems, the companies were forced to devise their own set of legal practices through which land claims were made and sustained (Figure 5). Following the first German forays on Bear Island a series of ‘common laws’ were adopted.

“The procedure followed was that placards were erected bearing the company’s names and dates of occupation, as well as specifying the area claimed. These placards were often signed by attesting witnesses. But they might easily be removed, the area occupied anew by people who sometimes acted in good faith. In time it was demanded that there should be working going on in the occupied area, or at any rate that occupation should be renewed at certain intervals ... the occupation was registered with the foreign ministry in the country of the occupying party” (Mathiesen 1954, 42).

⁵ The Washington Evening Star, 5th Nov 1906

⁶ The New York Sun, 21th Oct 1905

These 'ceremonies of possession' were far from unique among resource peripheries (Seed 1992; Dodds 2006). But the demarcation of land claims by the mining companies on Spitsbergen, although formally lodged with their respective national governments, were not enforced by them. In the legal vacuum of Terra Nullius these claims were therefore little more than private agreements between businesses with no available sanctions beyond a fierce rebuke.

The Spitsbergen Treaty

While the lack of any sovereign power in Spitsbergen ensured the absence of expensive mining tariffs, the costs of protecting claims from rival companies and uncertainties over land tenure hampered mining development. The search for an alternative to the Terra Nullius regime that might better serve the archipelago's new semi-permanent mining population therefore had broad support from both companies and governments. Having secured its independence from Sweden in 1905, Norway took the lead in convening a preliminary conference on the issue with Sweden and Russia in 1908/9. But the lack of an American presence undermined these early discussions. A year later the three countries tried again. They produced a new draft constitution to regulate the pioneer mining communities. Mining claims and labour disputes were to be governed by a new international convention and a tribunal. Other government functions were to be carried out by the individual states to which the miners belonged (Mathiesen 1954). The agreement of these terms was overtaken by events however, when the international conference convened in Christiania (Oslo) in 1914 was cut short by the outbreak of war.

During World War I, Allied commercial activity on Spitsbergen ceased. The neutral Norwegians made use of this hiatus to strengthen their position, first through the acquisition of the ACC assets from the Americans in 1916 and then by occupying the claims of several British companies. By the time the Paris Peace Conference finally convened in 1919, Norway was then able to put forward a new solution to Spitsbergen dilemma: full Norwegian sovereignty. This was based on its obvious proximity to Spitsbergen, its long historical association with the archipelago and its neutral status during the War. Norway could also point to its now significant commercial interests as further support. Although it was advocated by the Americans, the Norwegian proposal met with some initial resistance. During the negotiations, the Dutch proposed a League of Nations mandate for Norway rather than full Sovereignty. Britain and Sweden both voiced doubts about protecting their respective companies on the islands. But in the end, the Spitsbergen Treaty was signed in February 19th 1920. Alongside the conditional sovereignty awarded to Norway, there was also a ban on the militarisation of the archipelago, and an assurance that Norwegian mining companies would not receive any preferential treatment. After much consultation with Britain and Scandinavian countries, a mining code was

subsequently drafted in 1925. This laid out how mining taxes would be raised and spent (only on Spitsbergen) and the legal rights that the existing mining companies would enjoy. Soviet Russia eventually signed the Treaty in 1935 in exchange for official recognition from Norway.

With this political settlement mining on Spitsbergen entered a new phase. Instead of the large numbers of small mining companies seen in 1919, Spitsbergen came to be dominated by two state-subsidised mining giants: the Norwegian StoreNorsk and the Russian Arktikugol. For much of the mid 20th Century, the activities of these companies on Spitsbergen were as much a part of the political act of occupation as a commercial venture. Today 41 countries are signatories to the Spitsbergen Treaty - Saudi Arabia, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela among them. And as ever, resource exploitation in the archipelago continues to cause geopolitical and commercial tension. The current wrangling is not over coal, but oil and fish. At times, Spitsbergen's unique legal regime comes into conflict with the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (1982). The Spitsbergen Treaty supposedly guarantees an "equitable regime" of access for all signatory states. But it was signed at a time when territorial waters only stretched 4 miles off the coast and in which the legal oversight of the oceans was underdeveloped (Caracciolo 2009). Today national jurisdiction can extend much further and Norway has taken the opportunity to impose an exclusive fisheries zone in Svalbard 200 miles off-shore. In 1985 it even announced it would commence petroleum prospecting on Svalbard's continental shelf with no mention of other signatory states. Russia has long protested that this breaks the terms of the original treaty. However it is ultimately resolved, the tensions between national sovereignty in what has become a unique international space continue to be problematic. Spitsbergen's history is never far away it seems.

Chapter 3

British Mining Interests and the Spitsbergen Bubble

"Now that nearly all the mineral bearing lands in West Spitsbergen have been claimed, it might seem probable that the Spitsbergen rush would end. But the contrary is the case. Spitsbergen is only now beginning to find a place in popular geographic knowledge. The rich prospects of some of the mining estates combined with recent events which have brought the country into public notice and are attracting many adventurous spirits. 'Mushroom companies' with vague claims arise and disappear as quickly. Other retire discomfited when they find that despite the curious conditions of land tenure there is some fixity of titles, and claims cannot be jumped with absolute impunity ... Some of the ambitious prospectors, anxious to find a sure and quick road to riches, would save themselves much trouble and not a little disappointment by trying to acquire some idea of the conditions in Spitsbergen before they set out, or before they launch their proposals on the public". (Rudmose Brown 1920, 231).

From mid 1918 to early 1919 the London stock exchange saw a peak in demand for the shares of Spitsbergen's mining companies. The two largest British ventures, the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate (SSS) and the Northern Exploration Company (NEC), had recently gone public. Investor appetite was high. Exaggerated claims about the mineral wealth to be found in the archipelago were circulating in London. Many of the most fanciful descriptions came in the prospectuses of several of 'paper tiger' companies established to take advantage of the boom. They often claimed territories they did not own or deposits that did not exist (Johannesen 1995). One such was the Scotch Consolidated Coal and Iron Field Company (SCCIFC) - described by the SSS as "an exceedingly vague promotion" and a "fraud" - which claimed that its Spitsbergen iron ore deposits were sufficient to supply the annual requirements of the whole world. The archipelago, it said, was an "Arctic El Dorado".⁷

Directors of both the NEC and the SSS privately acknowledged that in this atmosphere their shares were overvalued. An SSS shareholder suggested to the company's founder in September 1918 that "As you say our shares may be worth over par at present, especially in view of the boom in the NEC, but we must look to future value which seems to me to depend much more on how things are handled now."⁸ Both companies were keen to take advantage of the investor interest while it lasted. As one SSS Director warned:

⁷ Letter from Marples to Rudmose Brown, 8th Jan 1919 (SPRI MS 101/103 C) and Spitsbergen Coal and Iron Fields Company, 1919 (RSM Archive MS 10/132)

⁸ Letter from Burn Murdoch to Bruce 26th Sep 1918 (SRI MS 101/103 C)

“I think before NEC collapses SSS would take definite actions early next year if possible and take any advantage there can be out of an even temporary NEC bluffing boom when people may be inclined to put money into SSS solidity, the solidity and small amount of money so far spent by the SSS should ultimately pay I feel sure.”⁹

The boom had caught the public’s imagination and Spitsbergen received extensive coverage in the public media. When Norwegian sovereignty was first discussed at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the acting Foreign Secretary in London, Lord Curzon, wrote to Arthur Balfour, who was representing Britain. He warned that giving sovereignty to Norway “would give rise to a violent outburst of British public opinion which has become deeply interested in those islands, [in] which British interests already occupy a very dominant position.”¹⁰ But as interest in the archipelago grew so too did the instability of the rapidly developing financial bubble that accompanied it. Ultimately the high share prices did not last long. At the beginning of 1919 it was reported that “NEC shares are falling back again ... this is bad for business”.¹¹ By 1921 the share prices of both companies had collapsed.

How then did this brief rush for Spitsbergen’s resources develop such momentum? What drove those ‘adventurous spirits’ northwards and how did Spitsbergen come to “find a place in the popular geographical knowledge” of Britain (Rudmose Brown 1920, 231)? Like any financial bubble or speculative mania, the Spitsbergen coal rush went through a number of clear stages (Kindleberger 1996; Ferguson 2008). Firstly a change in economic conditions or a new discovery creates the opportunity for profit. This is followed by investor speculation and overtrading which drives share prices (and thus shareholder returns) skywards. The prospect of easy capital gains then draws in naive first time investors as well as fraudsters seeking quick returns. Eventually knowledgeable investors realise their shareholdings are hugely overvalued and they sell causing a slump in the share price and then the mass exodus of the first-time investors. The bubble bursts – all evidence of the ‘irrational exuberance’ of markets (Ferguson 2008, 122). In each of these stages the role of information is vital. Bubbles develop out of the gap in specific knowledge between insiders (those that promote and run the companies) and outsiders (the uninformed investor). Controlling the information available to the investing public therefore is vital to the development of bubbles. For this reason, financial bubbles often tend to have a strong spatial dimension focusing on places where the amount of available information is limited. In those distant unknown spaces, fanciful claims can go unchallenged.

⁹ Letter from Rudmose Brown to Bruce, 19th Aug 1918 (SPRI MS 356/95 CP)

¹⁰ Letter from Curzon to Balfour, 9th Aug 1919 (National Archives CAB 24/5)

¹¹ Letter from Holton Bush to Bruce, 19th Oct 1918 (SPRI 101/103)

The British mining companies on Spitsbergen were no exception to this pattern. The NEC and the SSS built on the early promise of coal and other minerals first discovered by Norwegian prospectors to attract investor interest, exploiting their near monopoly on information about the distant Arctic archipelago. Using a complex network of scientific accreditation, of allies in government circles and even by enlisting the services of famous polar explorers, the NEC and the SSS were able to give authority to a body of writing and hearsay that exaggerated the true mineral potential of Spitsbergen. For a brief period they became enormously powerful in shaping the public, although not ultimately the British Government's, view of Spitsbergen. They portrayed the archipelago as not only hugely valuable but also as a vital part of Britain's strategic and imperial goals in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. In doing so, these two companies were taking advantage of the widespread ignorance among the public regarding the actual conditions on Spitsbergen. They were also benefitting from a huge increase in British investment overseas in colonial (particularly in South Africa) and other mining stocks during the early 20th Century. This encouraged a much wider demographic to start speculating in mining shares; a trend that was fuelled by the emergence of a British financial press from the 1890s which increased public awareness of investment opportunities abroad, if not always in the most accurate ways (Magee and Thompson 2010). Publications like *The Financier* and the *Daily Chronicle* began to list a range of companies investing overseas in everything from mining to textiles. This was the first great era of global commerce, and even the Arctic was a part of it (Hirst 1997).

British Mining Companies

"From the early years of this century not a summer passes without a dozen or more prospecting parties arriving in Spitsbergen" noted one observer in 1920 (Rudmose Brown 1920, 229). It was not long before these prospecting parties grew into private investment syndicates. In 1904 the first to emerge was the Spitsbergen Coal Trading Company based in Sheffield with £25,000 of nominal capital subscribed by over one hundred investors. It set up the first permanent mining camp in Advent Bay a year later. In 1906 two other British ventures formed: The Spitsbergen Mining and Exploration Company (with £15,350 of nominal capital raised from 83 investors) and Spitsbergen United (£10,000 of nominal capital with 3 major investors, including a dentist and a schools inspector) (Speak 1982). These early British ventures did not last long. They were rapidly overtaken by the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate (SSS) and the Northern Exploration Company (NEC).

The Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate

Among the earliest of the many British seasonal visitors to Spitsbergen at the turn of the century was the Scottish naturalist and polar explorer William Spiers Bruce (1861 – 1921) (Figure 1).¹² He first visited Spitsbergen aboard the Prince of Monaco's yacht in 1898 and began to map Prince Charles Foreland. Subsequent expeditions in 1899, 1906 and 1907 gave Bruce a commanding knowledge of the interior of Spitsbergen and of its adjacent islands. And it was not long before he sought to maximise the commercial potential of his discoveries. On his return from the 1907 expedition, Bruce claimed mineral deposits in Bellsund with the British Foreign Office. Using these territories as its basis, the following year he created the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate (SSS) with the help of the professor of geography at Sheffield University, Robert Rudmose Brown¹³ – his regular expedition companion (Figure 7). Neither man took on a Directorship of the new company, believing that they lacked the necessary commercial experience for such a role. They were its expedition leaders and its publicists. The initial start-up capital of £200 was provided by fifty close friends of Bruce drawn from Edinburgh's scientific and business circles. Bruce's reputation as a scientist and polar explorer having led the Scottish Antarctic Expedition (1902-4) to the South Orkneys and the Weddell Sea and also through his role as Head of the Edinburgh Oceanic Laboratory gave the venture added credibility.

The capital raised was used to finance two expeditions to occupy new claims in 1909 and subsequently in 1914. But during the war these claims fell into abeyance. The armistice in 1918 therefore left the SSS in desperate need of new capital to re-establish their position on Spitsbergen. Taking advantage of the high coal price and the renewed public interest in the archipelago in 1919, the SSS raised £100,000 by means of a public offer on the London Stock

¹² William Spiers Bruce (1861 – 1921) was perhaps Scotland's most eminent Polar expedition leader during the heroic age. He first went to Antarctica in 1892 as an assistant scientist with the Dundee Whaling Fleet, subsequently also visiting Spitsbergen and the Arctic islands of Novaya Zemla. He applied and failed to get a place on Scott's *Discovery* expedition, by then Britain's most experienced polar scientist. He therefore decided to mount his own Scottish National Antarctic Expedition (1902 – 1904) to the South Orkney's and the Weddell Sea earning himself the permanent hatred of the British Geographical Establishment. On his return he ran the Scottish Oceanic Laboratory until his death.

¹³ Robert Rudmose Brown (1879 – 1957) was a one of Britain's foremost geographical academics. He accompanied Bruce on many of his expeditions to Spitsbergen and also on the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition. Rudmose Brown became a lecturer in Geography at Sheffield University in 1907 and by virtue of many seasons as a field botanist in Spitsbergen was a Vice-President of the International Polar Congress. In 1937-8 he was made President of the Institute of British Geographers. A prodigious author on the geography of the Polar Regions, he was also President of both the Antarctic and Arctic Clubs.

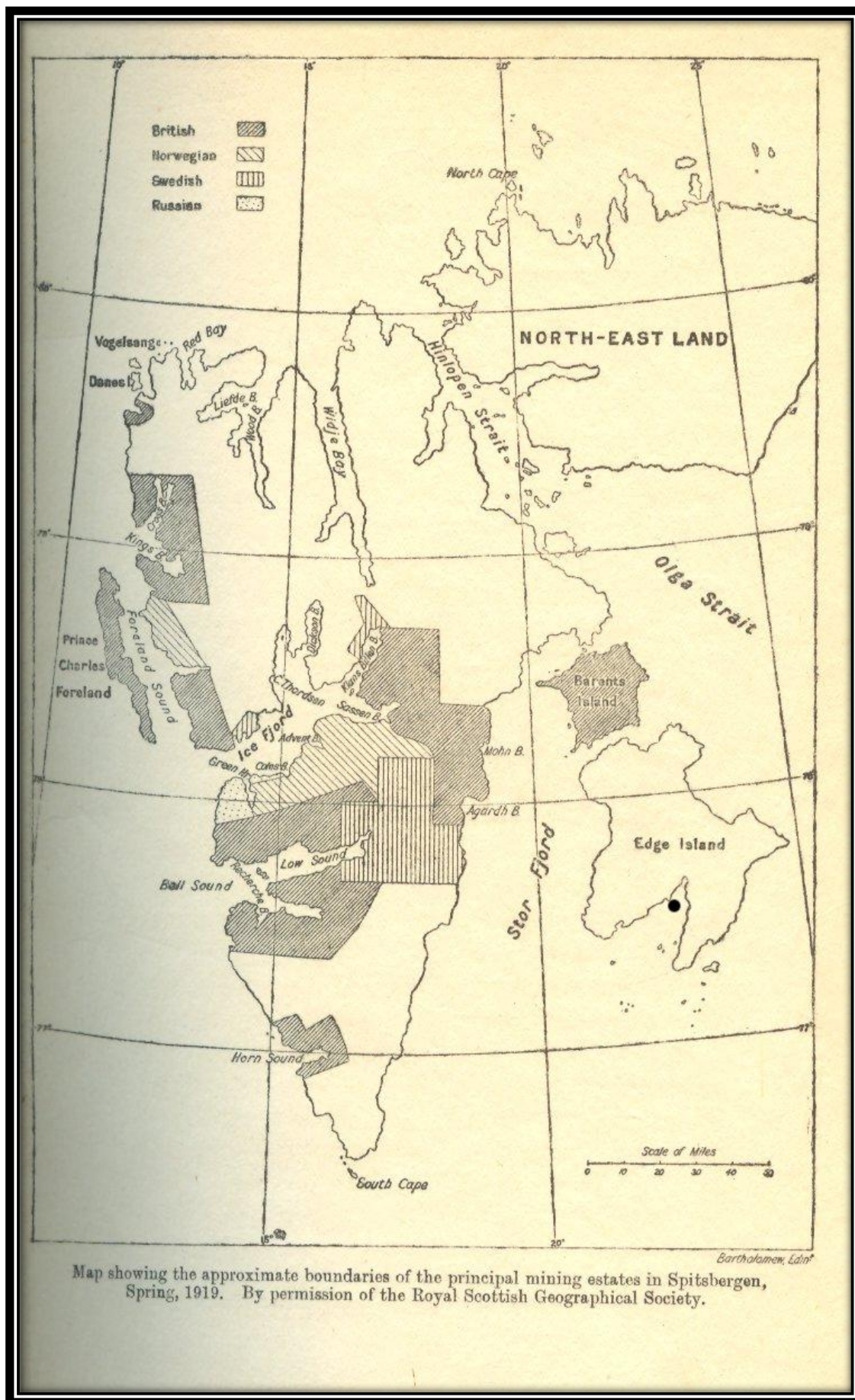


Figure 3: Map of Spitsbergen's mining territories 1919 (Source Rudmose Brown 1919a)

Exchange.¹⁴ Soon after, they chartered the *Petunia* from the Admiralty and Bruce led yet another expedition to survey deposits in Klaus Billen Bay. A subsequent expedition, again led by Bruce despite failing health, was staged in 1921. Once more the prospectors busied themselves looking for new finds and occupying their existing claims. Thereafter, however, the company's limited financial resources restricted the SSS's activity on Spitsbergen (Speak 1982). Investor interest declined due to the inadequate mining returns. By 1926, a collapse in commodity prices and the prospect of mining royalties being imposed for the first time by the Norwegian government, left the SSS in a precarious position.

The company was fortunate in some ways to have been only focused on prospecting. No SSS coal was ever actually mined or sold. As a result the SSS avoided the high fixed costs of mining operations and was able to conserve its capital for much longer than some of its competitors. But nevertheless the cost of expeditions, of maintaining a grip on its land claims in this Arctic periphery, was ultimately draining. The onset of WWII saw the company still in existence but long since inactive. In 1946 a Norwegian company laid claim to a number of gypsum deposits over which the SSS had failed to exercise effective control. Sensing a bargain, two investors showed interest in buying the SSS's assets: a US financier and Colonel Urmston, the son of a longstanding shareholder. Eventually, the latter took over the company, paying 6 pence per share for the 100,000 shares still in existence (originally worth £1 each). But Urmston soon went bankrupt himself, and the company was finally sold to the Norwegian Government in 1952 for £27,500 (Speak 2003, 102).

The Northern Exploration Company

The NEC was founded slightly later on 15th November 1910 with a nominal starting capital of £100. Its founders and first Directors were the London based merchants Henry Williamson and Henry Millar. The company's mining territories were initially based on the claims made by the swashbuckling Ernest Mansfield (1862-1924) described by *The Evening Dispatch* somewhat improbably as "a musician, a man of letters and a mining engineer".¹⁵ In 1904 Mansfield found marble deposits in Kings Bay while on the first of many tourist cruises to Spitsbergen. Unable to raise sufficient capital himself, he soon sold his claims to the newly formed NEC on 2nd May 1911 for £75,000 (£5,000 in cash and the rest in shares).¹⁶ He was retained on the company payroll as an expedition leader. This purchase led the NEC to raise additional funds and by 1912 it had a nominal capital of £125,000 subscribed privately by 33 investors. In his first shareholder prospectus Millar explained that "My old friend Henry Williamson and I consider that this thing

¹⁴Details of the flotation are held in letters and official documents (SPRI MS 101/103C)

¹⁵ The Evening Dispatch, 3rd Aug 1911

¹⁶ NEC papers, (National Archives BT 31/32080/112730)

is much too good to share with the public, and therefore, while we carefully refrain from asking *anyone* to join us, we wish to give our good friends the opportunity ... of sharing in what we believe to be a chance of a lifetime [original italics]."¹⁷ These 'friends' came from across Britain. In particular, industrial cities such as Coventry (5 investors) provided the bulk of the investors.

The NEC's first commercial initiative on Spitsbergen in 1911 was to begin mining Mansfield's marble finds in King's Bay. But this venture soon collapsed because the quality of the marble, despite wide claims to the contrary, proved too low for commercial development (Arlov 1994). Undaunted however, the NEC continued to prospect for new deposits. To extend its territories, the company merged with Svensk Spitsbergen Kolfater, a Swedish company in 1912, taking Ludvig Lagercrantz, a Swede, onto their board.¹⁸ They then sent a major expedition to their claims on Spitsbergen in 1914 aboard the *Willem Barents* led by the Antarctic veterans Victor Campbell (leader of the Northern Party on Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition) and Michael Barne (member of the *Discovery* expedition). Aboard were eleven British and Norwegian sailors and a shore party of five Norwegian miners. The expedition mapped extensive iron ore deposits in the west of Spitsbergen, but was ultimately cut short by the outbreak of war (Erskine 1994).

Like the SSS, the NEC could do little during the early years of the conflict. Their position was however, transformed with the appointment of the influential Frederick William Salisbury Jones as Director in 1918. Despite the War still raging, Salisbury Jones was able to orchestrate a public offering on the London Stock Exchange - the first for a British Spitsbergen mining company. The public issue attracted a wide range of investors. They included a Deputy Commissioner in India Major Edmund Jones, at least three MPs and the Earl of Orford. Also listed were three 'spinsters' and a 'fruit seller' named Frederick Airey.¹⁹ Shareholdings were registered in the name of The National Bank of Scotland (300 shares), The London County and Westminster Bank (92,681 shares), as well as the Bank of Australasia and the Mercantile Bank of India indicating a wider imperial interest in the company.

In part these investors were drawn to the NEC because of an expedition the company mounted in August 1918 to accompany their public offering to the City. Salisbury Jones had the necessary political contacts to obtain government backing for the venture. Aboard the 850 ton tug *Ella* were four major veterans from the heroic age of Antarctic exploration: Ernest Shackleton (three Antarctic expeditions, two as leader aboard the *Endurance* and the *Nimrod*), Frank Wild (who visited the Antarctic on five separate occasions under Shackleton, Scott and Mawson), Herbert Ponting (the now famous photographer from Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition), and Dr James

¹⁷ NEC Shareholder Pamphlet (LSE Archives G 780 N 87)

¹⁸ NEC papers, (National Archives BT 31/32080/112730)

¹⁹ NEC company records, (National Archives BT 31/32080/112730)

McIlroy (surgeon aboard both Shackleton's *Endurance* and *Quest* expeditions). But despite this illustrious roll call, the mission was dogged by problems from the start. Shackleton had a suspected heart attack while they were in Tromsø and returned home, leaving Wild in charge of the shore party. Despite spending a year mining iron ore and coal, the results were a commercial disappointment. With assistance from his 50 Norwegian miners, Wild was only really able to engage in "extending the company's claims" and "investigating various Norwegian, Swedish and Russian claims".²⁰

The high profile nature of the *Ella* expedition and the dynamism of Salisbury Jones meant that by the time of the Spitsbergen Commission was set up in 1920 to arbitrate on the conflicting land claims of rival mining companies, the NEC had lodged claims over about 11 000 km² of territory with the British Foreign Office (Figure 4). They had also reached a nominal capitalisation of £1 million.²¹ For a brief period they were the largest mining undertaking in the whole archipelago; so large in fact that the NEC subsequently took up a central role in hosting a London conference of all Spitsbergen's mining companies in 1919 - an attempt to find an alternative to Norwegian sovereignty (Mathiesen 1954). However, when those efforts failed and their longstanding pressure on the British government for annexation proved unsuccessful, doubts grew about the company's long term viability (Arlov 1994). Problems with several of the company's deposits - mainly because of access and the mineral quality - exacerbated investor concern. By this time the company was also spending beyond its means. The report to shareholders in 1921 gave the cost of simply pegging out and occupying the company's claims as £115,203 for that year.²² Such expenditure was unsustainable and caused some investors to sell their shares. Consequently, just three years after the Spitsbergen hype was at its peak in 1919, £1 NEC shares were being quoted on the London Stock Exchange for as little as a shilling (Speak 1982, 42). The company did mount a final expedition in 1926 and made an attempt to buy some more Norwegian claims, but in doing so it came close to insolvency. In March 1930 it went into receivership and a notice in the *London Gazette* on 26th June 1934 announced its liquidation.

Both the NEC and the SSS therefore experienced the classic cycle of investment, widespread speculation, followed subsequently by the bursting of the bubble. As investor interest in the islands grew in the run up to the Spitsbergen Treaty, Spitsbergen came under closer public scrutiny. Soon the challenges and expense of mining in the High North became more widely apparent. Spitsbergen was no longer so remote and the available sources of information about

²⁰ Account of the *Ella* expedition in the SSS papers. (SPRI MS 311;CC)

²¹ NEC papers, (National Archives BT 31/32080/112730)

²² Ibid.

the archipelago grew, reducing the impact of the British companies. As *The Times* reported in 1919 “experts have differed as to the value of the mineral deposits and until the practical exploitation on a commercial scale has been undertaken it will be difficult to appraise their real value”.²³ With the solution of the archipelago’s legal status, the complex mixture of British national and imperial interest surrounding Spitsbergen that had sustained some of the investor hype quickly dissipated. Nevertheless, that the British public concerned itself at all with Spitsbergen at a time when so much of the world’s map was being redrawn in the aftermath of the First World War is in many ways surprising.

²³ The Times, 21st June 1919

Chapter 4

The Myth of Superabundance

“There was a boom in Spitsbergen, and even if this was partly due to wildly exaggerated statements, there can be no doubt that some of the British estates are very valuable. Bruce had always realised this, but had deprecated the stories of gold mines and “iron mountains” and so forth which from personal experience he knew to have no foundation” (Rudmose Brown 1923, 263).

Surprising though the British interest in Spitsbergen and its mining companies in 1919 perhaps was, it was no accident. The Spitsbergen boom was the culmination of a sustained campaign by the SSS and the NEC to raise the archipelago’s profile both in the press and with the Government. This promotion of Spitsbergen came in several different forms, often reacting to and taking advantage of changes in the political or economic situation. Initially, the focus was on portraying Spitsbergen as a great commercial opportunity with abundant mineral resources. To attract investment, the mining companies (particularly the NEC) sought to transform the imaginative geography of the archipelago from empty barren tundra and develop a new narrative.

The catalyst for this change in the public perception of Spitsbergen was the start of commercial coal mining. It was coal that the NEC and the SSS therefore emphasised most in their shareholder information. For example, the SSS prospectus of 1910 claimed that “the seams in question are of considerable thickness and offer great facilities for cheap working ... and are of most excellent quality”.²⁴ A year later, another shareholder report asserted that the “coal is very rich in carbon and of a high calorific value, so much so that the steamers plying between Tromsø, Trondheim and Christiania use nothing else.”²⁵ Combined with similar rhetoric from the NEC, these estimates began to filter through to the media. Reporting on a speech to the Manchester Geographical Society in 1913 given by William Spiers Bruce (the SSS founder), *The Times* described “the long flamed steam coal of high calorific value, with a very small percentage of sulphur and ash, that was almost equal to South Wales coal” to be found in Spitsbergen.²⁶ Similarly, *The South Wales Daily News* mentioned Spitsbergen’s “unlimited supply of coal practically equal to the best welsh coal”.²⁷

²⁴ SSS prospectus NLS GB 1335(43) p. 1

²⁵ SSS Prospectus 1908 (RSM 10/109)

²⁶ *The Times*, 16th Sept 1913

²⁷ *South Wales Daily News*, 31st Oct 1913

Wartime coal shortages only served to increase the zeal with which the companies reported their finds. By 1918 the estimates of coal deposits being claimed by both the NEC and the SSS reached new levels of exaggeration (Rudmose Brown 1923). *The Times* reported the NEC's coal output in 1918 as 80,000 tons - the largest by any single company yet recorded on Spitsbergen.²⁸ A year later, the small Spitsbergen Coal and Iron Fields Company claimed that their "coal alone covers over 5000 sq miles."²⁹ Even the SSS, usually conservative in their descriptions, declared in 1919 that the *Petunia* prospecting expedition achieved "the discovery of a large new coalfield at Klaus Billen Bay ... The total amount of coal on the Syndicate's estates in Klaus Billen Bay amounts to many millions of tonnes".³⁰

Alongside coal, rumours about huge iron ore deposits on Spitsbergen were also circulating. The NEC had long claimed that Spitsbergen contained an "iron mountain" of very pure quality, and with the return of the *Ella* in 1918, this idea gathered further momentum. A Yorkshire businessman, P. Clerk Rattray, commented in July 1918, "there is much activity in [Spitsbergen's] direction at present, the presence of valuable and accessible iron ore deposits having been discovered as well as coal".³¹ In the same year, one of the many speculative 'paper tiger' companies reported "some of the mountain ranges there are entirely composed of iron ore ... such enormous quantities as these would keep the world supplied for generations to come".³² *The Times* ran an article under the headline "Great Mineral Wealth in Spitsbergen: A Mountain of Iron Ore".³³ A year later it reported on an NEC shareholder meeting in which the Henry Williamson, the Chairman, spoke "of the great deposits of iron ore that existed in our properties in Spitsbergen".³⁴ Indeed, such was the NEC's belief in the quality of its iron ore deposits, the company had earlier asked the Ministry of Munitions to send an expedition to the archipelago to secure the mineral claim for the British war effort.³⁵ In the words of Arthur Mangham, an NEC company expedition leader:

"My unshakable conviction is that the iron deposits at Recherche Bay are unexampled in the world and practically inexhaustible. I said years ago that they are worth the Bank of England and I say so still." (cited in Hoel 1966, 451).

Nor did the companies stop at promoting coal and iron ore. As time went on they also reported evidence of a range of other minerals such as marble and gypsum. The 1913 NEC shareholder

²⁸ *The Times*, 3rd Oct 1918

²⁹ Spitsbergen Coal and Iron Fields Company, 1919 (RSM Archive MS 10/132)

³⁰ *Ibid*

³¹ Letter from P. B. Clerk Rattray to C. H Urmston, 15th July 1918 (SPRI MS 356/96 CP)

³² Spitsbergen Coal and Iron Fields Company, 1919 (RSM Archive MS 10/132)

³³ *The Times*, 10th Dec 1918

³⁴ *The Times*, 27th June 1919

³⁵ *Ibid*.

report described the “remarkable deposits of marble ... which ... ranks second in value to the rich gold deposits” to be found in their territories on Spitsbergen.³⁶ At around the same time, the SSS also had found promising signs of the mineral. One of their deposits was described by a Scottish newspaper to be a seam “about 15 miles in extent”.³⁷ Nearly six years later in 1919 the NEC Chairman addressed shareholders claiming that

“Amongst our other possessions is an enormous deposit of beautiful marble of a highly ornamental and varied character which will take centuries to work out. Illustrations of some of these marbles have from time to time been furnished to shareholders and many of you have no doubt seen the beautiful samples now in the company’s offices”.³⁸

As a true ‘Arctic El Dorado’, Spitsbergen would also not have been complete without gold. In 1911 *The Evening Dispatch* described one of the NEC’s discoveries by Ernest Mansfield under the headline “Gold! Gold! Reported Amazing Find” and claimed that it “can no longer be hidden that there are the most astonishing indications of gold and an inexhaustible coal supply in the unexplored territory of the frozen North”.³⁹ In the same year, *The Times* ran a headline “Gold in Spitsbergen” reporting that the Harwich steamer *Repentor* “has returned to Spitsbergen in search of gold, regarding which the closest secrecy had previously been observed. It is now stated that the expedition has been an unqualified success, gold-bearing quartz of payable value having been found in considerable quantity”.⁴⁰

These reports of Spitsbergen’s gold appear to have circulated in spite, rather than because of, the NEC and the SSS. Both companies were at pains to divert attention away from the baseless rumours towards their own iron ore and coal deposits. But the lure of gold was strong at that time. Stories of the metal in the archipelago had their root cause in the great Arctic gold rush to North America’s Yukon Basin during the latter years of the 19th century. The gold mania on the Klondike River had captivated not only North America but also the rest of the world. It had first drawn large numbers of prospectors Northwards in 1885 following sensational reports of great fortunes to be made almost overnight (Webb 1985). Gold fever infected people of all backgrounds. The arrival in Seattle of a steamship, *The Portland*, with news of a gold strike resulted in a mass exodus from the city. Many professionals such as doctors - even the city’s mayor - joined the unemployed in the rush northwards, gold pans in hand (Bronson 1977). Within a year of the first news of gold, the *New York Herald* financial pages listed eight different gold prospecting companies based on the Klondike with a capitalisation of \$25 million in 1886,

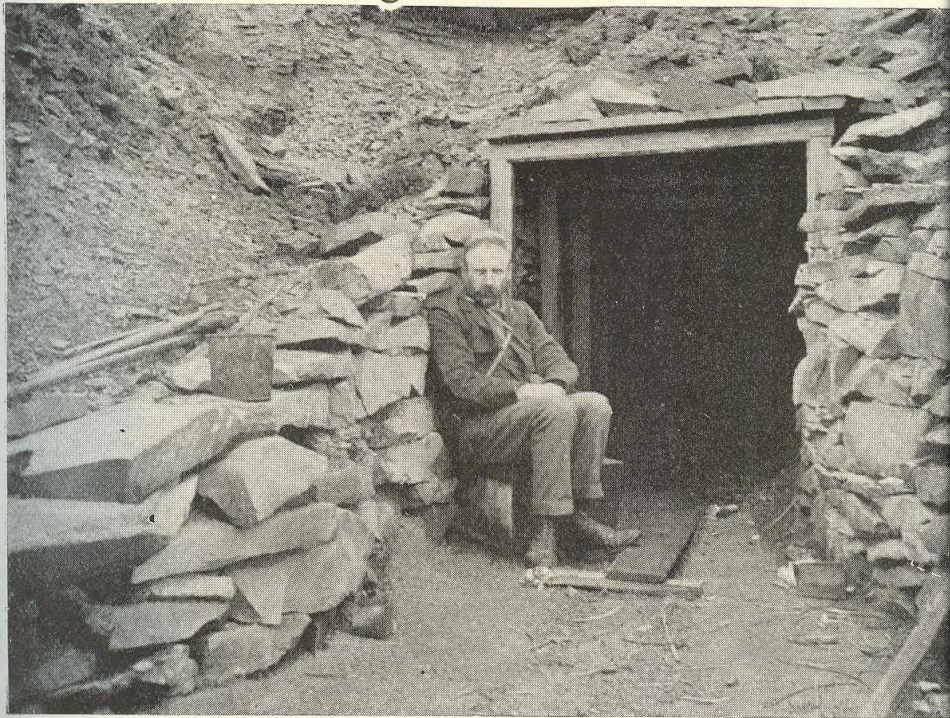
³⁶ NEC shareholder pamphlet 1913 (LSE G 780 N87)

³⁷ *The Scotsman*, 19th June 1912

³⁸ As reported in *The Times*, 27th June 1919

³⁹ *The Evening Dispatch*, 3rd Aug 1911

⁴⁰ *The Times*, 13th Oct 1911



MINE OPENING IN GREEN HARBOUR.
Most of the coal mines are horizontal adits.



TOURISTS LANDING.
A party of Germans disembarking from a Hamburg-Amerika Liner.

Figure 4: British mining territories and tourists disembarking on Spitsbergen (Source: Rudmose Brown 1920)

Even the Rothschild bank were promoting the Alaskan Exploration Company at this stage (Berton 1958, 103).

In part the influence of the Klondike on the British Spitsbergen boom was due to individuals such as Ernest Mansfield – the man who first secured territories for the NEC – who had himself participated in the Yukon Gold Rush. But even more important was the imaginative legacy of the gold rush. Klondike supplied evidence of the Arctic's mineral bounty. It provided an imaginative template with which the NEC and the SSS could persuade investors of Spitsbergen's commercial potential. As with many distant and inaccessible places such as Central Africa or South America, Spitsbergen was therefore invested early on with some promise of the great golden riches. Under the influence of NEC and the SSS this gradually shifted towards coal and more prosaic minerals. But the spell Klondike cast across the world laid the basis for much of the subsequent romantic attachment to the commercial possibilities in the Arctic.

As the geology of Spitsbergen was re-imagined, so too was its climate, geography and environment. Once thought to be barren and incapable of supporting life, Spitsbergen underwent a dramatic shift. The pure air of the archipelago was suddenly believed to have health benefits. In 1910 Sir Ernest Shackleton even claimed it would be “an excellent place for sanatoria for consumptives”.⁴¹ Warmed by the Gulf Stream, Spitsbergen's unique climate came to be viewed as yet another part of its commercial potential. Even the cold winter became an advantage: the frozen ground reducing the need for the expensive reinforcing of mine shafts. The archipelago's relative proximity to Europe was also stressed (Figure 5). As Rudmose Brown argued:

“It should be noted that Spitsbergen is not as far from Europe as is usually supposed by those unacquainted with the facts. Mercator's projection is largely responsible for this apparently great distance. Nor is it as inaccessible as its inclusion in the Polar Regions might suggest ... one or two icebreakers could easily keep open the Western harbours in winter and ensure navigation all year round” (Rudmose Brown 1912, 570).

Establishing Credibility

These claims of superabundant resources were not unchallenged. Doubts did circulate about the actual commercial viability of mining on Spitsbergen. Some dissenting voices even came from within the ranks of SSS and the NEC themselves.⁴² In the year that *The Times* reported the NEC's coal output at 80,000 tons, Frank Wild, the person in charge of the coal mining operations on Spitsbergen, subsequently admitted that they had actually only managed to mine several tons

⁴¹ *The Times*, 21st Dec 1910

⁴² In 1916 a shareholder RS Allan sold his shares in protest at the SSS's role in agitating and lobbying government about Spitsbergen (SPRI MS 101/103)

(Mills 1999). Writing an account decades later in the South African Journal *Outspan*, Wild also stated that “after a few days we found that far from being a mountain of iron there were only isolated pockets, and although the ore proved to be of very high value it would not pay to work” (cited in Mills 1999, 280). He was not alone in his doubts about Spitsbergen’s iron ore potential. Bruce and Rudmose Brown of the SSS, both scientists, scrupulously avoided the most outrageous and unfounded claims of ‘iron mountains’. They shared the opinion of Professor Stanfield at Oxford University who, in letter to *The Times* in 1918, argued that “while explorers differ, there seems to be no valid ground for believing in the idea of much iron ore capable of profitable development”.⁴³ Government officials agreed. Many felt that the rumours had been inflated by commercial interests. In 1919, Lord Curzon described some of the claims as a “sham, and that the iron ore either did not exist or was valueless”.⁴⁴ Doubts about the real quality of the marble were also raised. William Barne, leader of the 1914 NEC expedition, reported that Spitsbergen’s marble was both thin on the ground and tended to “disintegrate when taken to a mild climate” (cited in Erskine 1993, 120).

There were several reasons why these well-founded objections did not seriously undermine the idea of superabundance on Spitsbergen. Most importantly, the critics were far less vocal with their objections than they might have been. This was perhaps due to the fact that individuals like Wild and Barne were themselves in the employ of the NEC, paid with company shares. They would have perhaps felt that loudly voicing their concerns would have been disloyal as well as making little financial sense. And although privately the Spitsbergen experts in the SSS were also very sceptical of some of the most outrageous reports, they understood that damaging the credibility of the NEC might reflect back badly on their own company. Equally significant, however, was the careful and sustained use of scientific and expert testimony employed to support many of the claims made by both companies in their shareholder information. As the premier producers of information about Spitsbergen during this period in Britain, the companies developed a formidable network of scientific and journalistic allies through which they made their claims credible. They were able to use this privileged position as both the chief scientific explorers and commercial developers of Spitsbergen to reshape much of the archipelago’s “imaginative geology”.

The Power of Samples and Science

A vital component of this process was the transport back to Britain and subsequent laboratory testing of mineral samples from Spitsbergen. This process of assaying has a long history in the

⁴³ *The Times*, 20th Oct 1918

⁴⁴ From British Documents Relating to Spitsbergen Commission 1919 (ed. Woodward and Butler) p. 227

Arctic dating back to Frobisher's expedition to Northern Canada and his return with a large supply of supposedly gold bearing ore. The use of samples involved both collecting and calibration and became important to the public understanding of this distant and unknown region. On Spitsbergen, both the NEC and the SSS went to great lengths to demonstrate that their samples of coal conformed to the newly developing international standards on mineral quality. The 1910 SSS report included a favourable chemical comparison between coal samples from Spitsbergen, Glamorgan and the Clyne Valley (then the most widely used steam coal sources in Britain) conducted by the expert geologist Andrew King. His report was reprinted in full and described the samples of Spitsbergen coal as being "exceedingly well adapted for steam or navigation purposes".⁴⁵

As the companies grew in size, so did the numbers of scientists brought in within this assaying process. Bruce, in particular, was able to make full use of his formidable academic contacts to mobilise scientific support for the SSS. Professor Stanfield of Heriott Watt College (where Bruce also lectured) conducted a boiler test for the SSS to confirm the calorific content of a sample of Spitsbergen coal in 1912. In the same year a colleague of his, H. Briggs compared samples of Spitsbergen coal favourably to many others from across the world.⁴⁶ Rather than shed doubt on the companies' claims, this scientific process therefore actually supported and underpinned much of the hyperbole surrounding Spitsbergen. As one European geographer noted "Rumours regarding the discovery of tin, lead, copper and even gold are very doubtful. In 1908 an English expedition bought back many samples of different minerals and helped to spread the rumour that the exploitation of Spitsbergen minerals, in addition to coal would be very remunerative" (Denuce 1910). In short, the world of commerce and the supposedly disinterested practice of polar science were closely entangled.

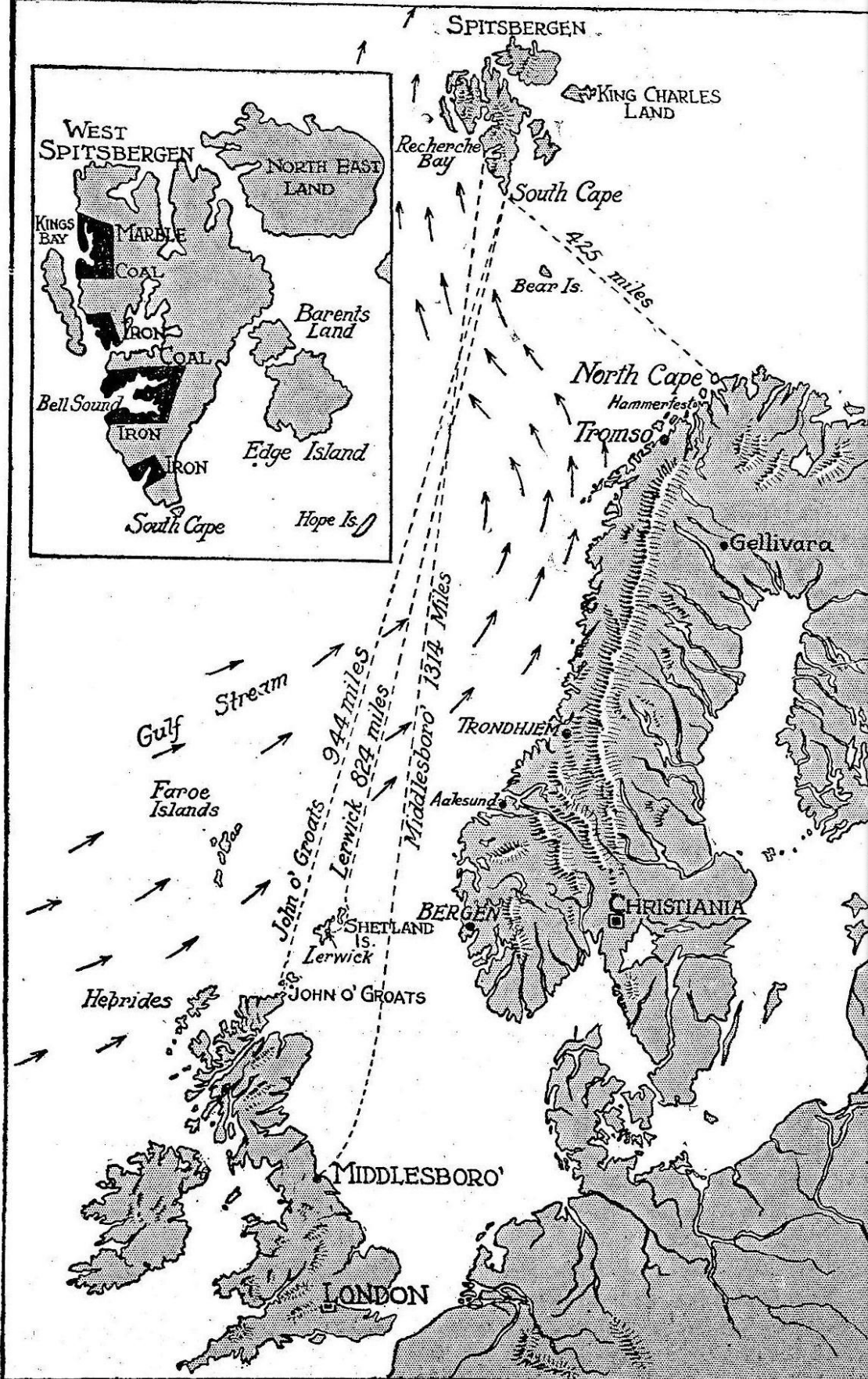
Some of the scientists involved with the SSS were even enlisted to inspect the deposits directly. Their expert witnessing of Spitsbergen's geological promise was reproduced in both shareholder reports and the press articles they inspired. This provided further corroboration for the companies' claims. The scientists included Sheffield University Professor of Geology McWilliam as well as Rudmose Brown himself.⁴⁷ In 1910 Bruce mentioned that "one or two of the subscribers have expressed a desire to join the expedition we have decided to try and make

⁴⁵ SSS Prospectus 1912 NLS (GB 1335(43))

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ SSS Circular 1910 (National Library of Scotland GB 1335 (43))

NORTHERN EXPLORATION COMPANY'S AREAS IN DEEP BLACK



SHOWING DISTANCES FROM DIFFERENT PARTS OF BRITAIN

Figure 5: An NEC map of the company's deposits and Spitsbergen's potential mineral markets reprinted from the Times in 1919 (Source: The Times 17th June 1919)

arrangements accordingly, subject to the accommodation available and other considerations”.⁴⁸ The majority of these men were geologists or botanists. The 1919 *Petunia* expedition had the renowned Polar scientist and explorer, James Wordie (then Oxford University Demonstrator in Petrology), as second in command. He was joined by Professor Horne of Edinburgh University (a colleague of Bruce’s). This close involvement of scientists continued even after the Spitsbergen bubble had burst. The 1921 SSS expedition had a Glasgow University Professor of Geology aboard who reported that Spitsbergen could produce cheaper coal than mines in the north of England. In 1967 Adolf Hoel concluded that “no other company was so thorough” as the SSS in the use of expert scientists for the exploration and mapping of Spitsbergen (cited in Speak 1982, 48).

Many of these experts did not simply testify to the mineral potential of Spitsbergen in the pages of company reports. A large number of supporting articles appeared in learned academic journals. In particular Rudmose Brown used his academic position at Sheffield University to reinforce the claims of mineral abundance (Rudmose Brown 1912; 1915; 1919a; 1919b). As Bruce’s second-in-command on the Scottish Antarctic Expedition he had already achieved a reputation as polar expert. By 1910 Rudmose Brown had a long academic career prior to his involvement with the SSS. He had worked at Dundee University, at the Scottish Oceanic Laboratory with Bruce, and at Aberdeen University before finally becoming a lecturer in geography at Sheffield University in 1907. His repeated expeditions north to Spitsbergen gave him an enormous polar scientific pedigree which he cemented through his subsequent appointment as Vice-President of the International Polar Congress. He was also a prodigious author on Spitsbergen affairs, writing not just articles in academic journals but also whole books, including the first authoritative geography and history of Spitsbergen in 1920. Along with Bruce, Rudmose Brown was perhaps Britain’s acknowledged expert on Spitsbergen – a position he regularly cemented by lecturing at the RGS. Much later, in 1955, he even authored the Spitsbergen article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Rudmose Brown’s claims about the archipelago therefore had considerable weight and he used this to full effect to promote the archipelago and the plight of the British companies investing there. In the journal *Scottish Geographical Magazine* in 1912 he wrote of the “very pure coal” with “little moisture and high caloric content” found throughout the archipelago (Rudmose Brown 1912, 565). In the same article he spoke of the NEC’s marble finds “said to be of fine quality and of various colours, and the quarries promise to become a centre of great activity in a year or two” (Rudmose Brown 1912, 569). By 1919 Rudmose Brown was writing in the Royal Geographical Society’s own *Geographical Journal* that “Spitsbergen coal will supply every part of

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Norway and Russia between Trondheim and Archangel” (Rudmose Brown 1919). A year later in his authoritative work *Spitsbergen*, he estimated the archipelago’s total coal deposits as “unlikely to be under 2,000,000,000 tons” (Rudmose Brown 1920, 219). And he was not alone in his academic publications. In 1916 an article in *Nature* described two Swedish finds “calculated to yield about 3,000 million tonnes of ... coal”.⁴⁹ Other articles made similar claims (Cadwell 1919; Ponting 1919; Conway 1919; Conway and Mossman 1915). Together these publications supported the narrative of superabundance. They entrenched the idea that both the NEC and the SSS had a wide scientific backing for their claims. As Rudmose brown himself commented on a recent article in *The World’s Work* about the SSS claims, “I feel sure its appearance in such a periodical will have a very beneficial effect as it will mean promoting an interest in many and intensifying it in those who already realise the wealth of this land of contention”.⁵⁰

Manipulation of the Press

It was not long before many of these academic claims began to excite media interest. This was partly the result of a concerted public relations effort by both companies directed at journalists and newspapers throughout the country. In response to press comment on the NEC, Rudmose Brown told Bruce in August 1918, “We ought to try from some outside source to get a paragraph in the press that another company with equally large estates is also operating in Spitsbergen, namely the SSS.”⁵¹ It was a policy both companies strongly adopted from 1910 to 1920. In this, the SSS was able to make special use of its shareholder John Henry Kenneth, a former journalist. In 1918 the SSS secretary Henry Aitken suggested, “Let [Kenneth] ... know what is going on and he might inspire newspapers as he did before. In this case, however, I think it would be necessary for you to see the article before it is published.”⁵² A number of articles subsequently appeared in local newspapers such as the *Daily Lancashire Post* and a newspaper in Blackpool focusing on the SSS and its mineral reserves.⁵³ Similarly, extracts of a widely circulated NEC pamphlet entitled *Spitsbergen’s Mineral Wealth: a Bulwark of British Industry* also appeared in a number of London weekly magazines.⁵⁴

However, the biggest public relations coup came through the use of polar explorers by the NEC. Williamson and the NEC Board of Directors made a point of hiring established Antarctic veterans such as Barne, Campbell, Shackleton and Wild to lead their expeditions northwards. In some ways these men played a similar role as the scientists and assayers used by the SSS: they

⁴⁹ *Nature* July 27th 1916 p. 449

⁵⁰ Letter from Rudmose Brown to Philp, 7th May 1913 (SPRI 356/95 CP)

⁵¹ Letter from Rudmose Brown to Bruce, 30th Aug 1918 (SPRI MS 101/103)

⁵² Letter From SSS secretary (Aitken) to Bruce, 3rd Sep 1918 (MS 101/103)

⁵³ *Ibid.*

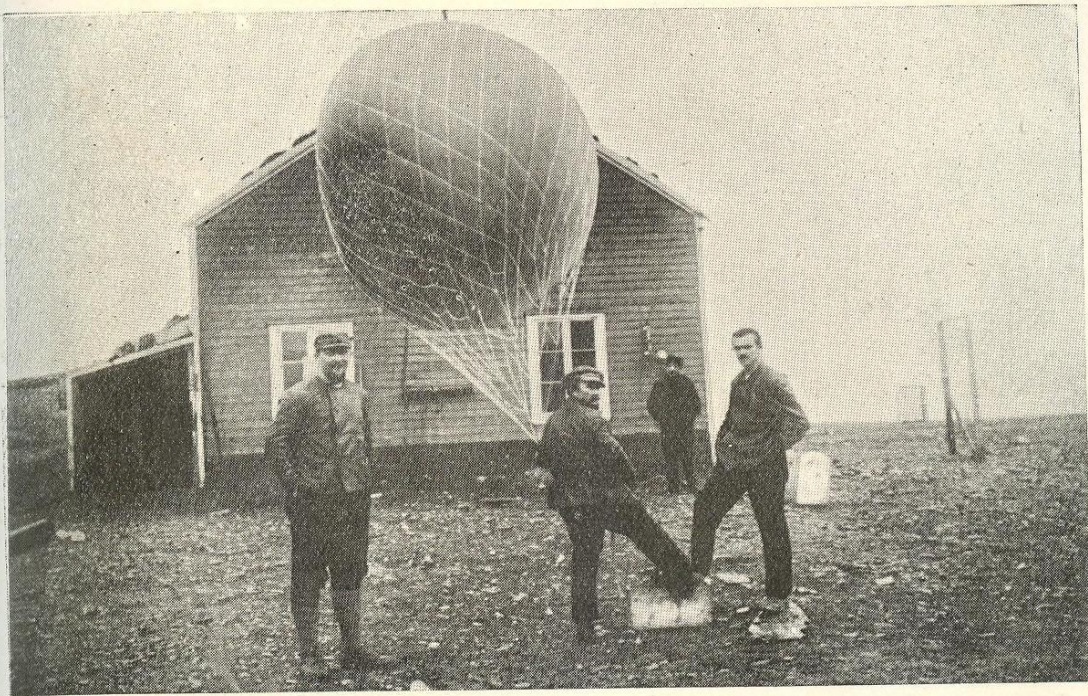
⁵⁴ Dated 1916. For more details see Mathiesen 1950, 105

provided reliable testimony about the unknown Polar Regions to the British public. But they also had a much higher media profile that ensured a wider audience for their claims. The publicity Herbert Ponting gave to the NEC's iron ore finds following his return from a brief trip to the archipelago accompanying Wild and Shackleton aboard the *Ella* in 1918 is a key example of this process. Ponting was, of course, no stranger to self-promotion. His photographs of Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition have become iconic and were among the first to make the continent knowable to the wider world. He knew better than most the huge imaginative power of polar space. Just days after his return, Ponting told a meeting of the RGS, fully reported in both the *The Times* and *The Geographical Journal* that "he had seen great tracts of land where the coal seams could easily be traced by the eye. At Recherche Bay he tramped along the side of a mountain several miles long and some 1,500 ft high which seemed a solid mass of iron ore, so rich that a magnet held to the ground could pick up fragments of it".⁵⁵ It was Ponting therefore, who was the chief source of the highly dubious iron mountain myth. As a shareholder in the NEC (with £7000 worth of stock in 1921), he clearly had an interest in promoting the company's mineral claims and illustrated them with a number of photographs.⁵⁶ Such was his promotional power, Bruce worried to Rudmose Brown that he might highjack the ostensibly scientific RGS meeting for commercial purposes. "I ... hope", he wrote, "Ponting won't be too long advertising".⁵⁷

⁵⁵ As reported in *The Times*, 10th Dec 1918

⁵⁶ NEC archives (National Archives BT 31/32080/112730)

⁵⁷ Letter from Bruce to Rudmose Brown, 3rd Dec 1918 (SPRI MS 356/95 C)



GERMAN WIRELESS STATION, AUGUST, 1914.
The staff is preparing to send up the balloon to which the aerial is attached.



A CLAIM BOARD.
Notice boards indicate the boundaries of mining estates.

Chapter 5

The Strategic Importance of Spitsbergen

“Strategically it is undesirable that any other nation than Britain should have the command of the immense mineral wealth”.⁵⁸

A second narrative about Spitsbergen also emerged alongside the myth of its superabundant resources during this period. With the archipelago’s economic value established, the NEC and the SSS began to stress Spitsbergen’s strategic importance to Britain. Their aim was to push the British government into annexing the islands. The companies saw the incorporation of Spitsbergen into the British Empire as vital to achieving security of tenure for their rapidly expanding land claims. Both companies argued that the archipelago was both too valuable in commercial terms and too important strategically to be allowed to slip into another nation’s hands. This narrative was developed in three stages. Initially the NEC and the SSS had always sought first to portray Spitsbergen as a lost imperial territory, with the companies themselves as British imperial pioneers in need of government support. As one SSS shareholder commented to Bruce in 1914 “It is a pity one can’t run up to Spitsbergen, land a few men, hoist the flag and annex it as one could have in the old days”.⁵⁹

With the outbreak of the First World War however, the NEC and the SSS adapted their approach. In letters to the government, in public lectures and in articles, Bruce, Rudmose Brown and the NEC portrayed Spitsbergen as a vital military base – an ‘Arctic Gibraltar’ – vulnerable to seizure by other European powers, most notably the Germans (Mathiesen 1952, 123). Finally, following the Allied intervention in Northern Russia in 1918, fears over the militarisation of the Arctic came dramatically to life. Spitsbergen lay just several hundred miles north of Britain’s sole supply route to its forces in Northern Russia, and as such, took on a potentially huge naval significance in the fight against a new foe: the Bolshevik Red Army. In this anxious political climate the two British companies were able to successfully mobilise public interest in their annexation agenda.

The NEC and the SSS were not alone in this campaign. From the outset, mining companies of other nationalities also lobbied their respective governments to acquire Spitsbergen. The founder of the American Coal Company, Charles Longyear, fought a long campaign in the US Congress for American annexation. At one stage, he even attempted to invoke a largely defunct law - the Guano Act of 1856 - which had extended American jurisdiction to any unclaimed island where American commercial enterprises were involved in mining guano for fertiliser (Dole

⁵⁸ Letter from the NEC and the SSS to the Foreign Office 18th November 1916 (SPRI MS 101/103 C)

⁵⁹ Letter from Kenneth (Koeppern) to Bruce, 14th Aug 1914 (RSM MS 10/130)

1922). Norwegian, Swedish and Dutch companies made similar efforts. Regardless of the national context however, these arguments ultimately failed to convince the relevant policy makers. In Britain, the NEC and the SSS developed a sustained and sophisticated campaign which, although targeted primarily at politicians and Government officials in the Foreign Office, also sought to stoke public and press interest in the archipelago as a way of forcing the Government's hand. Both companies used their extensive personal networks of influence to achieve their ends. The campaign therefore operated simultaneously in both the media and also in the private corridors of the power. And although it was ultimately unsuccessful, for a brief period it nevertheless did enlist widespread public support.

Imperial expansion into the Arctic

It was the SSS that originally initiated the campaign for annexation. In September 1912, Bruce wrote to Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty:

"I am not a scaremonger, nor am I one of those who seek for aggrandisement of the British Empire, but I do think, and am sure every other British subject who has thoughtfully visited Spitsbergen agrees, that it is a serious menace to Britain to have a foreign nation and especially Russia holding an unlimited supply of what we may call Welsh steam coal within two days steaming of British shores."⁶⁰

This letter set out the important pre-war argument as to why Britain should annex Spitsbergen. It combined the archipelago's mineral wealth with concerns about the intentions of other Arctic powers in the region. Crucially, it also began to stress Spitsbergen's relative proximity to Britain and its potential as a hostile naval base, supplied with abundant coal. This argument was made in a number of private meetings Bruce held with government officials and other prominent people before the outbreak of war. Just a month after contacting Churchill, he wrote directly to Britain's most powerful newspaper magnate, Lord Northcliffe. As owner of both *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*, Northcliffe was not afraid of using his media empire to promote certain issues he deemed to be of national importance, most famously during 'the shell shortage campaign' leading to the creation of Ministry of Munitions in 1916. Bruce's hope was that Northcliffe might adopt the annexation of Spitsbergen as a campaigning cause. In his letter, Bruce argued that:

"there is no doubt in my mind and in the minds of other Britons who have visited Spitsbergen that the right thing for Britain to do is either to affirm her annexation of 1615 of this land ... which under British auspices would have great economic potential, or else to re-annex it ... I am advised that the matter can only be pressed forward if there is sufficient public opinion at the

⁶⁰ Letter from Bruce to his MP Price (circulated to Churchill), 16th Sep 1912 (RSM 11/148)

back of it. This is why I write to ask your help: the position is that the public know nothing about Spitsbergen and that the Government refuse to [take] action on expert opinion".⁶¹

We have no record of Northcliffe's reply but it was not long before the annexation of Spitsbergen by Britain was being openly discussed in the national media. *The Morning Post* reported in 1912 that Spitsbergen has "an excellent naval base, with valuable coal supplies only about 3 day's steaming from our own shores, of which this country fails to realise the importance".⁶² A year later the archipelago's strategic importance was raised by Bruce in his address to the Manchester Geographical Society. He argued that Britain was being left behind in the race for Spitsbergen and that even American citizens now favoured the British rule of law as a solution to the archipelago's uncertain legal status. He again called on Britain to "affirm her act of annexation in 1615".⁶³ The next day, *The Birmingham Daily Post* reported the speech under the headline "British annexation of Spitsbergen suggested".⁶⁴ This growing media interest in the case for annexation gave the NEC and the SSS greater leverage in their ongoing negotiations with the Government. And in May 1914 both the companies were cautiously optimistic that progress was being made. Rudmose Brown described to Bruce how "Williamson [the NEC chairman] was emphatic that the FO was far more interested than ever their letters show and was well up in Spitsbergen affairs from a commercial and strategic point of view and will tolerate no interference with British Rights. So our long advocacy of Britain's rights to take Spitsbergen is beginning to bear fruit".⁶⁵

The Impact of the First World War

The outbreak of war provided the annexation campaign with huge impetus. On 5th June 1916 the Secretary of State for War, Field Marshall Lord Kitchener (and some 600 others) drowned when the cruiser HMS Hampshire hit a mine laid by a German submarine off the Orkney Islands en route to Murmansk and then St Petersburg. This tragedy dramatically brought home to the British public the strategic significance of the Barents Sea as the vital Allied supply route to Russia and the Eastern Front – the only other alternative following the failure at the Dardanelles in 1915 being the recently completed 5,700 mile Trans-Siberian Railway via Vladivostok. Located just 400 miles north of Norway and the only ice free northern Russian port of Murmansk (then precariously connected to St Petersburg by a recently completed railway) Spitsbergen therefore took on a new naval significance. The fear was that German submarines

⁶¹ Letter from Bruce to Northcliffe, 24th Oct 1912 (RSM 10/133)

⁶² *The Morning Post*, 7th Oct 1912

⁶³ Transcript is in found in the *Birmingham Daily Post*, 16th Sept 1913 (RSM MS 10/109).

⁶⁴ *The Birmingham Daily Post*, 16th Sept 1913

⁶⁵ Letter from Rudmose Brown to Bruce, 16th May 1914 (SPRI MS 101/103)



IN THE "SCOTIA'S" LABORATORY.

R. N. Rudmose Brown.

D. W. Wilton.

J. H. Harvey Pirie.

Figure 7: Rudmose Brown (left) on an expedition to Antarctica (Source: Rudmose Brown 1923)

might venture further northwards sheltering in Spitsbergen's ice free southern fjords and thereby pose a mortal threat to Allied shipping. Suddenly the danger was no longer annexation by Russia, but by Britain's war-time enemy: Germany. Against this background, annexing Spitsbergen became a potential national security issue. The NEC and the SSS actively circulated the rumour that the German weather station in the archipelago visited by both their expeditions in 1914 was still in operation, providing Germany with a potential base (Figure 6). By portraying Spitsbergen, and by extension their own mining territories, as vulnerable to German seizure, both British companies successfully attracted new sympathy and interest from among an increasingly nationalist British public as anti-German sentiment ran high.

In November 1916 the NEC and the SSS joined forces to write directly to the Foreign Secretary, Viscount Grey. The companies made "a strong plea for the annexation of Spitsbergen to the British Crown".⁶⁶ The letter used the British claim by Hudson in 1615 under James I as the historical background to their argument and described Spitsbergen as "both strategically and economically important" to Britain. Many countries, it argued, "are as fully aware as His Majesty's Government of the strategic and commercial value of this group of islands and that unless prompt action is taken, British interests will be seriously jeopardised. We also call attention to the fact that Germany prior to the War, and even at the present time, was and is keenly interested in Spitsbergen".⁶⁷ The companies went on to claim that "The German station [which] was used for experiments in relation to air-ships by Prince Henry of Prussia, Count Zeppelin and others prior to the war, and Germans have already carried on its communication since the outbreak of war (original underlining)".⁶⁸ The strategic threat was reinforced by Spitsbergen's potential for "harbours, submarine and aircraft bases and communications".⁶⁹ In short, the NEC and the SSS depicted the annexation of Spitsbergen as a strategic necessity within the wider geopolitical backdrop of the First World War.

In support of this letter, both companies sought a number of private interviews with individuals at the Admiralty, the Foreign Office, and the Civil Service to discuss annexation. As early as 1914, Bruce had been in regular contact with Sir Francis Hopwood, former Permanent Under Secretary in the Colonial Office. On the 18th November 1916 the two men met to discuss the NEC and the SSS's letter to the Foreign Office. Bruce reported to Rudmose Brown that at the meeting "Sir Francis Hopwood emphasised the value of importunity. He said we must hammer at the Foreign Office to attain our end." Hopwood subsequently offered to set up another useful meeting with the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Robert Cecil.

⁶⁶ Letter from NEC and SSS to Viscount Grey, Foreign Minister, 18th Nov 1916, (SPRI MS 101/103)

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Ibid

The companies also made allies in the Admiralty. Conveniently, Rudmose Brown took up a post in Naval Intelligence in London with responsibility for Arctic Affairs at the outbreak of war.⁷⁰ From this position he was no doubt able to stress Spitsbergen's strategic importance and to set up a number of meetings with leading Admiralty figures. Bruce and Rudmose Brown met regularly with Rear-Admiral Parry in 1915 and 1916. The Admiral was an early supporter of annexation, writing to Bruce in 1916 that "all this information about Spitsbergen is of great value, though at present unfortunately the Foreign Office seem averse to the permanent acquisition of that really valuable 'no man's land': it is absolutely certain if we do not take action now, that in future years our descendants will heartily curse our slackness."⁷¹ Bruce also met Admiral Edward Slade (a former Director of Naval Intelligence in 1908) and Captain Scrivener at the Admiralty, to talk through the details of his letter to the Foreign Office. He concluded that meeting by taking both men to the NEC offices in Fenchurch Street to show them samples of Spitsbergen coal by which "they were mightily impressed".⁷²

But despite the carefully marshalling of their arguments, the joint letter to Viscount Grey did not have the desired effect on the Foreign Office. Four days after it was sent, Bruce was summoned to meet the Minister's Private Secretary, George Clerke. Despite producing photographs of the German weather station at the meeting to reinforce his point, Clerk "did not hold out any hope that British annexation would be considered at the present moment on account of the partnership with Norway, Sweden and Russia".⁷³ It was clear that the Foreign Office line was to support the Terra Nullius status as agreed in 1873. No doubt this was due to the British Government's desire not to upset the important Scandinavian neutrals or their Russian allies at a pivotal point in the war.

Undeterred by their faltering negotiations with the Government, the NEC and the SSS also set about making further allies in scientific and business circles. Bruce met the recently appointed Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society Arthur Hinks in 1916. In a subsequent letter to the SSS secretary, Bruce described how he "put up a strong conversation with Mr Hinks, the secretary, indicating the importance of annexation of Spitsbergen from the economic and imperial point of view. I intend to follow up this channel by further pressure on the RGS, giving them what information I can so that if they are consulted by the Foreign Office they may have a better opportunity of pressing for British annexation".⁷⁴ Hinks and the RGS subsequently threw

⁷⁰ Obituary of Robert Neal Rudmose Brown, *Transactions and Papers* (Institute of British Geographers), No. 23 (1957), pp. viii-x

⁷¹ Letter from Parry to Bruce, 6th April 1916 (SPRI MS 101/103)

⁷² Letter from Bruce to Aitken, 7th Nov 1916 (SPRI MS 101/103)

⁷³ Letter from Bruce to Rudmose Brown, 20th Nov 1916 (SPRI 101/103)

⁷⁴ *Ibid*

their full weight behind the annexation agenda. The hope for both the NEC and the SSS was that support from Britain's most important geographical institution – long seen as a driver of imperial expansion around the globe – would help to convince the Government. In 1917 Bruce reported to Rudmose Brown that “the Geographical Society wrote to the FO re Spitsbergen, and Mr Hinks has had a conversation with de Bunsen [a former British Ambassador to Austria in 1914]”.⁷⁵ In 1919 the RGS even held a number of public meetings promoting the campaign, while Hinks continued to use his role as editor of the *Geographical Journal* to give Rudmose Brown an academic platform.⁷⁶

The SSS also sought support from key Scottish business organisations keen that British interests should not lose out in Spitsbergen. Bruce persuaded James Milne Henderson, Chairman of the Dundee Chamber of Commerce to write to the Foreign Office in support of annexation early in 1917. Milne Henderson argued that “from a strategic point of view, as well as from the government interests of Great Britain and her allies ... [Spitsbergen] should be brought under British rule as early a date as possible.”⁷⁷ The letter was subsequently circulated to both the First Lord of the Admiralty and to Sir William Robertson, Director of Military Intelligence. At Bruce's behest both the Glasgow and Aberdeen Chambers of Commerce also wrote to the Foreign Office.⁷⁸ By the end of 1917, the British Government was therefore receiving a carefully organised series of letters from commercial and scientific institutions in support of both annexation and the NEC and SSS's mining interests.

The Allied Intervention in North Russia

Just five months after the Battle of the Somme, longstanding fears surrounding the potential militarisation of the North Atlantic and Barents Seas suddenly became a grave reality. In March 1917 the First Russian Revolution ousted Tsar Nicholas and brought Kerensky to power. This dragged Allied troops into the Arctic for the first time. A small British naval force was subsequently landed at Murmansk to protect over a million tons of war supplies, both there and also at Archangel, left to supply the beleaguered Russian forces on the Eastern Front. Then in November 1917 the Bolshevik revolution transformed the War. Lenin decided to abandon hostilities with Germany and to sign the Russo-German Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 3rd March 1918. As Russia descended into civil war, the Allies hesitated about how best to prevent the transfer of Germany's huge Eastern Army to the battlefields of Western Europe. Finally on 2nd August 1918, the small British garrison in Murmansk was decisively reinforced - together

⁷⁵ Letter from Bruce to Rudmose Brown 5th Jan 1917 (SPRI MS 356/95 C)

⁷⁶ The RGS meeting most remembered was attended by Sir Martin Conway and Herbert Ponting in December 1918. Source: Letter from Bruce to Rudmose Brown 5th Jan 1917 (SPRI MS 101/103)

⁷⁷ Letter from Dundee Chamber of Commerce to Foreign Office, 26th Feb 1917 (SPRI MS 101/103)

⁷⁸ Letter from Aberdeen Chamber of Commerce to Bruce, 26th Nov 1918 (SPRI MS 356/95 C)

with the occupation of the port of Archangel - as part of a 21,000 strong Allied Intervention Force in support of the White Russians. The British, American, Canadian, French and Polish troops then advanced some way down the railways to the south. They remained in Northern Russia, supplied solely by ships sailing through the Barents Sea, until their final withdrawal in September 1919. For nearly a year after the end of the First World War, the Russian Arctic (and by extension Spitsbergen and the Barents Sea) was therefore left as the main theatre of Allied conflict in Europe.

The events surrounding the Bolshevik Revolution dramatically altered the British public perception of Spitsbergen. Article 33 of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk specifically stated that Russia and Germany would endeavour to find a political solution to the ownership of Spitsbergen and that both countries would be on an "equal footing" in its subsequent governance.⁷⁹ This inclusion of Spitsbergen in the treaty appeared to confirm all that the NEC and the SSS had claimed about German intentions in the North. And following the landing at Helsinki on 13th April 1918 of the 10,000 strong German Baltic Division, these fears about German activity in the Arctic only grew. Indeed, the German intervention in the Finnish Civil War which followed Finland's independence from Russia under Brest-Litovsk, was especially worrying for the Allies. At that time, Finland still retained in the Arctic a small stretch of coastline on the Barents Sea (in what came to known as the Pechenga enclave), just 60 miles west of the British garrison at Murmansk. Had the Germans succeeded in occupying the whole of Finland, the Allies feared they might well take Murmansk and establish a submarine base from which to attack the vital supply line to Russia (Kettle 1992, Halliday 1961).

With the extension of this first global conflict to Arctic waters in 1918, the strategic position of Spitsbergen underwent intense scrutiny in London. Brest-Litovsk seemed to provide convincing evidence that the archipelago might soon be occupied by enemy troops. Such was the concern, the British Government finally agreed to support an NEC expedition to the archipelago in the summer of 1918. This decision followed a meeting on 31st January 1918 in which the newly appointed NEC Director, Frederick William Salisbury Jones, convinced Sir Ronald Graham (Deputy Under-Secretary to the Foreign Office) and Sir Esme Howard (ambassador to Sweden) to make the Admiralty supply the company with a small tug, the *Ella*, armed with a 4 inch cannon, 60 rifles and 100,000 rounds of ammunition (Mills 1993).⁸⁰ The Government also agreed to release the Polar veterans Shackleton, Wild (who was in Murmansk), and McLroy

⁷⁹ Full text of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/bl34.asp#chap9

⁸⁰ Memorandum from Rudmose Brown detailing a joint meeting at the FO with Salisbury Jones. The meeting is dated 31st Jan 1918. (SPRI MS 356/95 CP)



A SPITSBERGEN CAMP.

Bruce with St. Andrew's Cross, Lat. 79°N.

AN ANTARCTIC CAMP.

Laurie Islands, South Orkneys, Lat. 61°S.

Note the differences at Midsummer as regards both scenery and camp equipment.

Figure 8: The polar explorer at both extremes: Bruce in both the Arctic and the Antarctic (Source: Rudmose Brown 1923)

from their military duties to lead the expedition (with Ponting accompanying the initial outward journey). Bruce (of the SSS) described how “the NEC claims to have support of the Foreign Office and the Admiralty in their project ... and they have ... a ‘bulldog’ [i.e. Salisbury Jones] in the background who compels the Foreign Office to do what the NEC wants”.⁸¹ The NEC expedition provided the British government with convenient cover to investigate claims of German activity on Spitsbergen under the guise of a legitimate commercial expedition. This would allow them to avoid obviously infringing the terms of Spitsbergen demilitarised status under the Terra Nullius agreement.

The *Ella* expedition also provided splendid press coverage for the NEC as well as a focus for the popular debate over annexation. This was due both to the fraught military situation in the Barents Sea at the time, as well as to the presence aboard of the famous polar explorers. Ponting was not the only member of the crew to feature prominently in the press after his return from Spitsbergen. The actions of Frank Wild who, following Shackleton’s suspected heart attack in Norway, had been left - as on Elephant Island on the *Endurance* expedition - in command of the shore party, also generated a high media profile. His decision to build a new NEC mining camp, Davis City, not far from the remains of the German weather station, which he dismantled, caused a sensation. Given the government support for the expedition, there was a widespread rumour that Wild had actually claimed Spitsbergen for the British Crown.

As Rudmose Brown reported “An expedition ... in the summer of 1918 annexed the whole peninsula on which the German estates had been situated and raised the British flag at Ebeltoft Haven. It was this action which, exaggerated in significance by the Press, gave rise at the time to the report that Britain had annexed Spitsbergen” (Rudmose-Brown 1920, 279). *The Times* ran with the headline “British Flag Raised on Spitsbergen”. It added that “a clause in the Russo-German peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk, apparently deciding to divide up the islands between the two contracting parties, aroused a great deal of attention. There was considerable correspondence in *The Times* urging that Germany’s claims should not go unchallenged... Spitsbergen is immensely rich in coal and iron. The iron deposits are said to be unsurpassed in Europe, while the islands are supposed to contain as much coal as Belgium”.⁸² This duly produced a public outcry in Norway and elsewhere that Britain was flaunting the delicate Terra Nullius legal pact (Mathiesen 1952). In 1919 *Whitaker’s Almanac* actually listed Spitsbergen as part of the British Empire – a mistake that had to be corrected a year later.⁸³

⁸¹ Letter from Bruce to Rudmose-Brown, 5th June 1918 (SPRI MS 101/103/CP)

⁸² *The Times*, 3rd October 1918

⁸³ *Whitaker’s Almanac* 1919, 546

In a subsequent article in December 1918 *The Times* jingoistically reported that “It is small wonder that in the Brest-Litovsk Treaty the Germans demanded a free hand in the organisation of Spitsbergen; but the NEC’s expedition took possession of the German claim, dismantled the wireless apparatus, and unfurled the Union Jack in the flagstaff that formerly flew the German colours”.⁸⁴ In this article, Wild’s actions are portrayed as yet another triumph over the Germans, validated by the huge national symbolism of flag raising that has long been a feature of land claims in the North. The presence of the polar veterans elevated what was in reality a largely unsuccessful mining venture into something much more significant for the British public. The heroic exploits of Scott, Shackleton and the men they commanded had come to embody the British imperial ideal near the apogee of the British Empire (Barczewski 2009; Riffenburg 1993). Little wonder then that these national heroes were employed by both the NEC and the SSS to accompany expeditions to Spitsbergen. Antarctic Veterans like Shackleton, Campbell, Bruce and Wild himself combined experience of polar conditions with a high media profile. Nor were the men themselves lacking in commercial nous. They had to raise large sums for their expeditions and well understood the importance of media exposure better than most. Employing them to lead these commercial ventures ensured public interest in expeditions and lent both the NEC and the SSS a degree of credibility that might have otherwise been absent.

Polar explorers were therefore enrolled in the Spitsbergen boom in several different ways. They were hired to act in part as trusted witnesses of Spitsbergen who would produce reliable testimony about the archipelago for the British public (as Ponting had supposedly done). They were also useful publicists. But perhaps most importantly they were seen as patriots who could be trusted by both the Government and the companies to defend British interests. On the *Ella* Expedition, they therefore found themselves simultaneously inhabiting a number of different identities – as soldiers, spies, company promoters, publicists, mining engineers and even perhaps imperial claimers of territory (Driver 2001). In 1917, Shackleton and his men had been in total isolation on the *Endurance* expedition attempting to cross Antarctica. When Shackleton finally reached South Georgia he was greeted by the news that all of Europe had “gone mad” – the first he had heard of events for close to two years (Lancing 2000). Aboard the *Ella*, however, these men were far from isolated. They were catapulted into a tense geopolitical situation with complex commercial overtones. And while they had raised the Union Jack and been involved in the claiming of polar territory before, it had never been in such a strategically sensitive part of the world. Their presence in the Arctic reaffirmed Spitsbergen’s imaginative, political and commercial importance to the British public. Embodiments of British national identity, they came briefly to symbolise the international controversy over the ownership of Spitsbergen.

⁸⁴ The Times, 10th Dec 1918

On June 21st 1918 the Admiralty sent a memorandum to the Foreign Office concerned that “a regular campaign has been opened not only by the companies ... but by the Royal Geographical Society and various Chambers of Commerce as well as by Colonel Yate”.⁸⁵ Spurred on by media interest in the *Ells* expedition and the recent public offering of the NEC shares in London, the Government was repeatedly forced to defend its continuing commitment to Terra Nullius. The MP for Melton since 1910 and an acknowledged foreign policy expert, Colonel Charles Yate raised the Spitsbergen question regularly in the Houses of Commons. On 15th May 1919 in one notable exchange with a Foreign Office minister, Mr J. Hamsworth, Yate complained that

“Spitzbergen, as we all know, was annexed in the seventeenth century by King James I, as New Land. It was a great whaling district during that century, and was only abandoned when the whales left—no minerals being at that time known to exist there. Now the Northern Exploration Company and other companies have created great mining interests there, and at one time practically the whole place was under their control ... Then a Foreign Office official goes to a Conference [Christiana in 1914] and gives away the whole thing which practically belonged to Britain. That is the way the Foreign Office treats this country, and we are entitled to complain. Spitsbergen is a property that we have the greatest right to, and where we must insist on having permanent rights wherever British interests are concerned. There are valuable minerals. The coal deposits are most valuable for our Fleet in the North Sea. There is coal at the seashore ready to be delivered to our ships at Scapa Flow, within two days' sail. It is the finest steam coal that can be got. Our rights in Spitsbergen are absolutely essential to the safety of this country and not only as regards coal. The place is on the flank of our route to Archangel, Murmansk, and wherever we have intercourse with Russia through the White Sea and beyond. We know that the Germans established a wireless station there. They did not go to that expense for nothing.”⁸⁶

At the same time Rudmose Brown continued to press the case for annexation in a number of academic journals. He wrote that “The claims of Britain to have a controlling voice in Spitsbergen affairs are based on her pioneer work in mining, the extent of British estates (nearly three times the area of all other estates combined), the variety of minerals on British estates and possession of practically all the good harbours on the west coast” (Rudmose Brown 1919a, 210). In a subsequent article he warned that

“nothing should be done by prejudicial laws or regulations to fetter this activity, or this arctic treasure house will fail to take its place in the commercial development of Europe. Spitsbergen coal will supply every part of Norway and Russia between Trondhiem and Archangel...

⁸⁵ Government Memorandum from Lord Curzon, 21st June 1918 (National Archives: CAB 24/5)

⁸⁶ HC Deb 15 May 1919 vol 115 cc1922-32

Spitsbergen bids fair to become not only a great mining country but the grandest playground in Europe" (Rudmose Brown 1919b, 321).

The sudden rise in strategic concern about Spitsbergen in 1919 was therefore part circumstance and part design. The militarisation of the Arctic during the last years of the First World War gave great momentum to a longstanding campaign for annexation conducted by both the NEC and the SSS since 1910. The narrative changed focus, taking advantage of anti-German feeling and the heroic exploits of the nation's polar veterans. But at its heart, much of the case for the annexation of Spitsbergen was really motivated by commercial concerns: the security of the British mining claims on the islands. Nevertheless, when the narratives of superabundance and strategic importance operated in tandem, they briefly resulted in a considerable public interest in the archipelago. And despite its eventual failure, the annexation campaign does remind us of the extraordinary imaginative power of the Arctic for the British public, particularly when allied with the exploits of heroic polar explorers. Then, as now, the North remains an imaginative space onto which periodic outbursts of national identity can easily be mapped.

Chapter 6

The Spitsbergen Boom in Context

“It must be said that the British Government left the matter entirely to private enterprise, and never from the first to last did anything to help us, as to the Empire what might have become a useful commercial territory – one whose resources we were in a position to develop satisfactorily” (Cadwell 1919, 1).

On the surface, much has changed in the Arctic since 1920. In recent years higher commodity prices have driven mining and oil companies to search for new deposits. Mines in Greenland or Northern Canada have recently opened and off-shore oil rigs in the Barents and Bering Seas are beginning production (Emmerson 2010). The legacy of the Cold War, in which the Arctic was a key area of confrontation, also appears to be weakening. In April 2011 Russia and Norway finally resolved a long-standing border dispute in the Barents Sea. Presiding over these changes, the Arctic Council, complete with permanent participation by some of the region’s indigenous groups, is growing in stature. Its recent reports on oil and gas and shipping in the Arctic have been well received. But despite these dramatic recent changes in politics, economics and the environment, there remains a number of striking parallels between today’s Arctic and Spitsbergen in 1920. Certainly taking Spitsbergen as an example of the wider region is fraught with difficulty. There is much about the island, its archipelago and its history which is totally unique. But as we shall see, there are also some striking similarities.

Perhaps the most obvious parallel between the two eras is the way in which Arctic resources are still viewed. Much of the rhetoric remains remarkably similar. Investors have long looked northwards attracted by durable myths of superabundance. For example, when plans were made to reopen the Black Angel Mine in west Greenland by the British based Angel Mining Group last year, its publicity stated that “In the 1920s the Danes began mining marble at Marmorilik in the Uummannaq Fiord. The marble is of as high quality as the best Italian Carrara marble.”⁸⁷ Exactly the same comparison was made by Ponting 100 years earlier to describe the NEC’s marble deposits in Recherche Bay. The rhetoric of superabundance is also very apparent in the oil and gas sector. A widely reported USGS survey in 2008 estimated that the Arctic contained some 40 billion barrels of crude oil (87% off shore) and over 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (USGS 2008). This has lead to a number of dramatic predictions about the future. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 2008, S. Borgeson suggested that “Global warming has given birth to a new scramble for territory and resources among the Arctic powers ... The Alaskan coast

⁸⁷ See <http://www.angelmining.com/black-angel>

might one day look like the shores of Louisiana in the Gulf of Mexico, lit up at night by the millions of sparkling lights from offshore oil platforms” (Borgeson 2008, 68). In 1913, an NEC shareholder pamphlet included the following appraisal of the oil prospects on and around Spitsbergen:

“The attention of capitalists in every country is being drawn to oil. Huge sums of money are being expended in every part of the globe to find and tap new sources of supply for this eagerly sought commodity. No place is too remote, no difficulty too great to prevent the crush of oil prospectors and capital magnates to exploit the possibility of a new find. For an insignificant outlay, valuable discoveries may be made at any moment, as there is every indication that there is a huge oil project in the North”.⁸⁸

Given the extent of the Arctic’s predicted hydrocarbon wealth, geopolitical concerns about the future of the region have been apparently reawakened. “The current situation is especially dangerous because there are currently no overarching political or legal statutes that can provide for the orderly development of the region or mediate political disagreement over arctic resources or sea lanes ... In this legal no-man’s land, Arctic states are pursuing narrowly defined national interests”. (Borgeson 2008, 68-74). Quite apart from the fierce debate that surrounds the relative strength and importance of existing Arctic legal regimes, it is worth remembering that these concerns are not new. They have long been a feature of the Arctic’s only true ‘no man’s land’: Spitsbergen. Before the Treaty, commercial interests of different nationalities competed, and on occasion even fought one another, for access to resources. Military tensions were frequently high, particularly in the First World War. Nevertheless, a stable international agreement was ultimately reached.

Although the Heroic Age of exploration is over, the ongoing importance of Polar explorers also provide notable links with the past. They remain central to our understanding of the North. Certain established practices and performances of exploration continue to resonate with Western audiences. In 2007, the world’s media was astonished by an incident which occurred during an internationally funded scientific expedition to chart the Arctic Ocean seafloor. Arthur Chilingarov, a famous Russian polar explorer who was also speaker for the Russian State Duma, managed to plant a titanium Russian flag on the sea bed directly under the North Pole using a robotic arm. This action caused an international sensation. In response, the Canadian Prime Minister complained that “This isn’t the 15th century. You can’t go around the world and just plant flags and say, ‘We’re claiming this territory.’ ... it’s just a show by Russia.”⁸⁹ At the time it was largely forgotten that this was just the latest in a long line of similar territorial rituals in the

⁸⁸ NEC Shareholder Pamphlet, 1913 (LSE G 780 N87)

⁸⁹ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,499287,00.html>

Arctic (Figure 8). There was no legal or political advantage to Chillingarov's actions beyond the symbolic statement of interest in the North. It therefore strongly echoes Frank Wild on the west of Spitsbergen in 1918. Here was another experienced polar explorer, chosen partly for his celebrity, sent to investigate a part of the Arctic with an uncertain legal status. Wild's raising of the Union Jack was similarly seen by some in the international press as some sort of statement of national annexation. Rudmose Brown later commented that "A great deal of attention has lately been drawn to the resources of Spitsbergen, largely owing to a totally erroneous rumour in the Press last Autumn that Britain had annexed the country" (Rudmose Brown 1919, 210). In both cases the act of an established explorer raising a flag became a symbol for the international tension in the Arctic. In part because of their status as polar explorers of national repute, both Chilingarov and Wild appeared to have added legitimacy and significance. In the North, their actions had enormous emotive power.

"In the early twenty-first century there are two main discourses on geopolitics and security of the Arctic or the High North ... They offer contrasting accounts of the High North as it has emerged in the post-Cold War period. The mainstream discourse emphasizes its stability and peacefulness and the absence of armed conflicts or likelihood of them The other discourse, a minority view, argues that the Arctic, framed narrowly as the waters of the Arctic Ocean, has the potential to become a "race" for natural resources, particularly those related to energy like oil and natural gas, and consequently, to escalate in the direction of armed conflict." (Heinenen 2011, 91).

Heinenen reflects a widespread frustration among scholars that the public view of the Arctic among Western audiences (partly inspired by the actions of Chillingarov) can often differ markedly from the policy reality. And here once again Spitsbergen provides an interesting precedent. In 1919 two narratives about the future of the Spitsbergen also existed. In the popular press a jingoistic angle emerged advocating outright annexation and the strategic importance of the archipelago in Britain and across parts of Europe. But among the decision makers at the Paris Peace conference, confrontation gave way to collaboration. Writing about the imminent prospect of Norwegian sovereignty, acting Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon advised that "I think we should be prepared, if we agree in this course for a considerable amount of criticism in the press, no doubt mainly inspired by interested quarters but nevertheless not altogether negligible for what will be seen as the abandonment of British interests. This criticism will in future be enhanced should the deposits of iron ore in the island prove to be as rich as is claimed by the British prospectors."⁹⁰ Curzon was reflecting the prevalent mood in

⁹⁰ Letter from Curzon to Balfour 25th Aug 1919 (National Archives CAB 24/5).

Britain orchestrated by the NEC and the SSS, that Norwegian sovereignty would mean the end of British interests in the archipelago.

However, those who were actually deciding Spitsbergen's fate in Paris appeared to be much less affected by the nationalist hype. Balfour responded from Paris that opposing Norwegian sovereignty would "bad policy for the sake of an apprehended movement of public opinion in England which, I fear, may prove on closer analysis to be rather the result of artificial agitation by interested parties than a genuine expression of national feeling".⁹¹ The key point therefore is that Arctic policy makers have on occasion achieved creditable and beneficial agreements in spite of a nationalist outcry. They have succeeded in dealing with the Arctic as it really is, rather than what we might imagine it to be. When seeking solutions to today's challenges, it is perhaps therefore worth remembering that popular narratives, although unquestionably powerful, are not always to be heeded.

The Spitsbergen coal rush also reminds us of the present day Arctic in a huge number of more general ways. Energy security was as important then as it appears to be now. The Arctic's resources were seen by many states as a solution to their post-war shortages. Italy even insisted on having a position on the Spitsbergen Commission because it believed the archipelago might provide the country with a solution to its own energy shortfall for example (Mathiesen 1954). And in the 1910s, as now, much of the geopolitical wrangling between states was conducted by proxy through commercial companies. We have already seen how the NEC and the SSS enjoyed a very close relationship with the British Government. On occasion they even attended high-level international meetings. Bruce was present at the Christiania conference in 1914 and representatives from the NEC were also at the Paris Peace Conference.⁹² The NEC were also allowed to submit amendments to the Spitsbergen Treaty's Mining Code arguing for an elimination of the distinction between surface rights and mineral rights.⁹³

This proximity between the worlds of commerce and governance continues unabated to this day. Many of the major Arctic oil and gas companies are themselves largely state owned, meaning that governments may use them to forge strategic as well as commercial alliances. Similarly, the actions of ostensibly private companies continue to arouse close scrutiny by national governments. BP's recent aborted share-swap deal with the Russian state-owned oil and gas company Rosneft has been criticised by Democratic Congressmen Edward Markey in

⁹¹ Letter from Balfour to Curzon 19th Aug 1919 (National Archives CAB 24/5).

⁹² British documents relating to the Spitsbergen Commission 1919, 223 (cited in a letter from Curzon to Balfour).

⁹³ Comments submitted to the Board of Trade (SPRI MS 101/103 C)

the US for potentially compromising “national security”.⁹⁴ In negotiations over any number of major Arctic oil and gas developments – Svalbard’s ocean floor or the Schtokman gas field – this same entanglement of commercial, strategic and national interests, albeit more complicated by the size and scale, comes to bear. We must be more willing to put them in their long historical context.

Conclusion

This investigation has sought to understand how the British public briefly became so interested in a remote archipelago in the High North in 1919. Part of the answer lies in the coincidence of general trends: the high coal price, the legacy of the Klondike gold rush, and geopolitical tension during and after the First World War. But more than anything else, the key to explaining the Spitsbergen Bubble was the role of two coal mining companies, the SSS and the NEC. As Balfour wrote “it is unfortunately notorious that some British companies having interests in Spitsbergen were promoted, and have conducted their operations in circumstances not deserving to be measured by the highest standards”.⁹⁵ This is perhaps a touch unfair on the SSS who by all accounts possessed a more thoroughgoing and realistic understanding of the realities of mining on Spitsbergen than their NEC competitors. But nevertheless, the two companies were undoubtedly instrumental in developing a fascination in Spitsbergen which was not ultimately likely to yield much tangible economic result.

They did so through a mixture of private campaigning - mobilising a range of formidable government, commercial, academic and explorer networks of influence - and through orchestrating a very public debate about the future of the islands in the nation’s press. Their focus was on two linked narratives. One tried to remake Spitsbergen into an archipelago of extraordinary commercial potential, abundant in mineral resources. The other emphasised the islands’ vulnerability and strategic importance in a changing military situation. Although they were ultimately unsuccessful in convincing the Government to annex Spitsbergen, their various campaigns did coincide to create a fleeting moment of investor frenzy in the Arctic - a sincere belief that Spitsbergen with all its promises of coal, iron ore, marble and other minerals might provide Britain with a fabulous post-war Arctic bounty.

Spitsbergen’s history demonstrates clearly how places, particularly those uninhabited spaces on the edge of metropolitan maps, have often been altered to suit certain agendas. They are to some extent imaginative constructions; places where dreams of superabundance or fears of security threats can easily be projected. In the Polar Regions, the explorer appears to remain

⁹⁴ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/01/20/us-usa-energy-bp-idUSTRE70J5GK20110120>

⁹⁵ Letter from Balfour to Curzon, 19th Aug 1919(National Archives CAB 24/5)

pivotal to this process. But this dissertation has sought to get beyond simplistic descriptions of the explorer as a scientist or an embodiment of manhood. Certainly they were often these things. But there were also a range of important and complex commercial (and even military) motivations that drove many of these men northwards. Business and commercial interests have had, and continue to have, an overlooked but powerful role to play in shaping popular understandings of the North. In the case of the NEC and the SSS, their version of Spitsbergen was enabled through a complex web of networks which legitimised their vision of Spitsbergen's future. By carefully incorporating their estimates about Spitsbergen's geological promise within a wide community of expert scientists and explorers, both companies were able to shape and reshape the British understanding of the archipelago. They held a tight grip on the scientific information flow about the islands in this period, and as a result went a long way towards drowning out any alternative ideas.

This story also reminds us that though the Arctic is changing fundamentally, the ways in which we view, manage and understand it may be more durable than we imagine. It has been possible to trace particular types of superabundant rhetoric widely used today back as far as the turn of the last century and before. Similar tensions, between governments and commercial interests or between nations in an apparent legal vacuum, are as apparent then as they are today.

Seeing how the commercial interests of the NEC and SSS were able to legitimise a particular understanding of the North can therefore provide vital lessons for today's Arctic policy makers. As Avango et al. point out: "the current interaction between oil and gas interests and the governments of the arctic coastal states is nothing new in the history of the high Arctic and neither is the practice of flag waving" (2011, 38). If nothing else, the interest in Spitsbergen shows us clearly that the Arctic is not a fixed idea. It can be made and remade. Despite the doom-laden predictions and popular discourse in the British press, the Spitsbergen Treaty did succeed in achieving a unique and mostly equitable regime for the use of the archipelago. It diffused national and commercial tensions that a year before seemed insurmountable to some. Perhaps then, the Spitsbergen 'coal rush', ruinous though it no doubt was for some British investors, can ultimately be seen as a note of cautious optimism from the Arctic's industrial past.

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